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# IMARO III:
# THE TRAIL OF BOHU

CHARLES R. SAUNDERS

"IMARO FOLLOWS IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF CONAN... AN EPIC JOURNEY."—EONS

# THE TRAIL OF BOHU

Charles R. Saunders

DAW BOOKS

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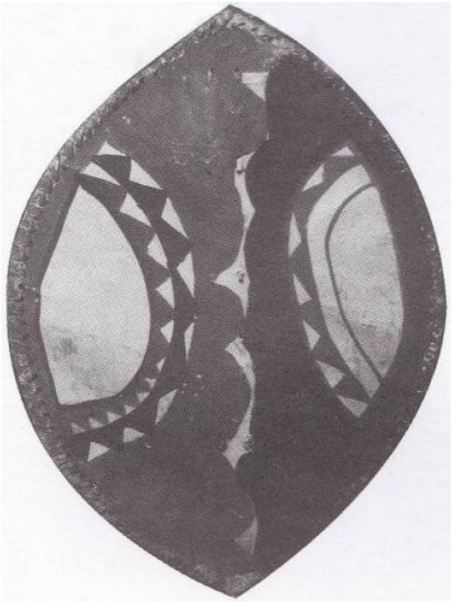
# NOTE

This is not the original text of the novel. It comes from a French translation that was then translated back into English. So while the story is likely the same as in the original text, it is hard to imagine that all the specifics of Charles Saunders' voice in in the original English have been maintained.

# THE BOHU TRAIL



BOOK 3

## PROLOGUE

Emerald lightning flashed through the hall of the Erriten Grand Council of Naama. They escaped from nineteen radiant spheres, suspended above nineteen granite thrones, fashioned to accommodate gigantic occupants. The Erriten, the True Adepts, the Great Sorcerers of the kingdom of Naama, greeted the emerald lightning like a parched land the first showers of the rainy season. They absorbed it without shuddering flash after flash; for the green lightning was the ***mchawi,*** the evil magic, source of their dark powers. The Erriten were feeding.

Their giant, ungainly bodies writhed in strange ecstasy beneath voluminous robes made of iridescent fabric. Their heads, human-sized, and therefore absurdly small above the gargantuan bodies, thumped nervously to right and left; they had their eyes closed and their mouths parted in a parody of carnal excitement they would never know.

The spheres were the Erriten's only link to the Mashataan, the Demon Gods whose purposes they had sworn to serve. It was for the ultimate fulfillment of these purposes that the Erriten ate, as they had not done for more than a thousand rains...

A twentieth throne stood in the Hall of the Great Council: an empty throne that no sphere of power surmounted. This was the symbol of a defeat that the Erriten were preparing to avenge.

Gradually, the brightness of the ***mchawi-bolts*** increased, to blinding intensity. When it seemed that the power generated by the spheres would consume the Erriten in a green blaze, a silent signal echoed among them. They all took off their robes at the same time.

The bodies thus revealed were horrifying to behold: an unholy assemblage of columnar legs, skeletal arms, and bloated torsos, covered in tentacles gleaming with green light as bright as the lightning that erupted from the spheres. The tentacles stiffened,

became tumescent and pointed in the direction of the nineteen fiery spheres like green fingers which were not long in igniting. Their miniature hells of emerald fire mingled with lightning. The twisted bodies of the Erriten shuddered and swayed under the mystical forces that pounded the walls of the hall, but their faces were masks of serenity, of accomplishment. The Erriten communed with their gods... ***almost...***

The dimensional barrier separating them from the Mashataan hadn't quite vanished. They felt the immense forms of the Gods-Demons move tirelessly, out of their sight, out of their reach. They heard the Mashataan speaking to them, inside their heads – voices that bridged the chasm between the two planes of existence. The Mashataan conveyed approving, encouraging thoughts – but also visions of the retribution awaiting the Erriten if they failed again.

These, whose carnal envelope had become similar to that of the Mashataan in exchange for the knowledge of the ***mchawi,*** listened to the thoughts of their masters while bathing in their power. The barrier was thin… defiantly thin. But the Erriten knew she would remain until they had succeeded in destroying all opposition to Mashataan worship at the Nyumbani. They enjoyed the exquisite pain of absorbing the power of their gods until the green lights died out and the spheres darkened.

When the transmission of power was complete, the Erriten put their robes back on and stood up. For an unmeasurable fraction of time, they stood in silence, contemplating the reality of their newly acquired powers. They had become avatars of the Mashataan, who would trample the realms of Nyumbani like so many anthills, once the infuriating barrier was removed.

To accomplish this, the power of the peoples opposing the Mashataan – and worshiping the opposing beings that were the Cloud Striders – would have to be destroyed. Now the Erriten had the ability to defeat all their foes – from the oldest, like the golden-eyed people of the Cush, to the newest, who were nonetheless dangerous and relentless.

The ***mchawi*** ran like blood through the Erriten's veins. Never before had the True Adepts been so filled with the power of their masters. Never had they been so close to accomplishing the ancestral purpose of the latter...

Finally, Chibenguela, the oldest and most powerful of the Erriten, broke the ecstasy that the transmission of power had created. Her face was a web of intertwined wrinkles; the gray tufts of his hair covered less than half his skull; but the vitality that burned in his eyes was different from the too fleeting youthful vigour.

"It's time," he said, in a strong, deep, inhuman voice.

The other Erriten nodded.

"We will strike in the lands of the Abamba." We'll strike along the east coast. We will hit Punt and Axum. And we will strike at the very heart of the Cush!

"Yes, the Cush!" one of the others shouted. And in Cush we will annihilate the cursed Imaro, avenge the death of Chitendu and Chikanda! When the Ilyassai is dead, our other tasks will be easy to accomplish...

— Silence, Chiwaka!

The other Erriten immediately calmed down.

— Concentrate your energy on spreading our ***mchawi.*** Don't deviate of the line drawn for us by our masters.

Chasing away the emotion that had arisen so unexpectedly, Chiwaka bowed her head in homage to the old follower.

"Let's go now," concluded Chibenguela. We all know our duty, our role, our obligations.

The nineteen Erriten slowly emerged from the Great Council chamber in single file, leaving their dark orbs of power hanging in the void above the thrones. The townspeople lurking in the shadow of the flat-topped mountain – the Citadel of the Erriten – shuddered as a dark, evil veil rose to obscure the moon and stars…

## 1.
# IN THE SHAUF

Meroe was a city of iron situated in the extreme west of the Kingdom of Cush, within sight of the high range of the Gwaridi-Milima mountains. These, which stretched as far west as the eye could see, were an inexhaustible source of ferrous ores. So the city was born of iron.
It was said that the first building erected here had been a founder's hut. Miners, smelters, blacksmiths – these are the people who created Méroe.

In several hundred rains, this single cabin had turned into a sprawling giant; the smoke from thousands of forges obscured the daytime sky and heaps of slag rose, like the offspring of the Gwaridi Milima. The Cushites had long since discovered the secret of steel; the weapons and tools made by the craftsmen of Meroe were considered the best in all of Nyumbani.

Despite the smoke, the dairymen and the din of industry, Meroe was more than the simple sum of its forges and mines. This was the true heart of the Cush, though the kandisa, spiritual High Priestess and age-old ruler of the realm, ruled in distant Napata. Meroe provided the tools that fashioned the splendid buildings designed by Cushite architects, forged the weapons that made the Cushite army virtually invincible in battle. Other countries had long learned how to transform iron into steel, but their metal was known to be brittle. The steel of Meroë never broke.

Although the city spread in the highlands and the lowlands, on both banks of the Shindi River, it was organized according to a plan which reduced the effects of the smoke from the forges. Each of the disciplines that make up the work of iron – from the makers of gardening tools to those of armor for elephants – had been assigned their own district. These neighborhoods, called ***shaufs,*** were widely scattered around the city t

avoid concentrating. The most prestigious was the ***shauf-i-fayim,*** or quarter of the Swords. For the straight and sharp blades of Meroe were the pride of the kingdom.

It was in the ***shauf-i-fayim that*** Imaro practiced his new trade.

"Imaro?" Do you want me to operate the bellows?

Akhini asked his question timidly. Imaro seemed unusually distracted that day. The rectangular iron bar had sat without heat on its anvil for far too long.

Looking down, Imaro met the young Cushite's golden eyes and made an almost visible effort to drive away the unease that had oppressed him all morning. His presentiment was attached to nothing in particular. It was vague, like the subtle senses of danger he sometimes felt as he walked the plains of Tamburure. Not so long ago...

— Sorry, Akhini. I was thinking, that's all. We better finish this sword before Arkhaman comes back.

Akhini nodded, a sad smile on her ebony face. Arkhaman was the master blacksmith and owner of what he liked to call "The best forge in the ***shauf, bar*** none!" ". Arkhaman was also Akhini's father and his rules of discipline were as rigid as the swords coming out of his forge.

Activating the leather bellows and watching the charcoal change from red to orange in the fireplace, Akhini remembered his first meeting with Imaro.

It had been five rains before, when he had only seen seven: he was still too small to do anything in the forge other than carrying water to the steeping vats. He remembered that Arkhaman had spoken to Shakheta – Akhini's mother – about the return to Meroe of Pomphis, the Bambuti, high on the council of the kandisa.

Pomphis, Arkhaman had said, had returned with two exotic-looking strangers whom he had introduced to the kandisa herself.
Now he was preparing to take them to Meroe, for the Bambuti and Arkhaman had been friends for a long time. The mail sent by Pomphis made a cryptic reference to one of their old debts which was soon to be settled.

Akhini remembered his first vision of Imaro. First, the boy had been frightened: Imaro was a real giant; even Arkhaman,

who passed for one of the strongest men in the ***shauf*** looked small next to him. And his eyes...

Akhini had seen dark-eyed people before – merchants from other countries often came to the shauf to buy their produce – but Imaro's eyes had reminded him of those of a lion… a wild lion, not a beast. tame, the sight of which was commonplace in the streets of Meroe.

As for Tanisha, Imaro's companion, it was something else. She was wearing a very loose dress because at the time she was carrying Imaro's child. Her midnight skin and obsidian eyes lit up a beauty unlike those commonly seen in northern Nyumbani. She seemed to exert a calming influence on the Ilyassai who was then like a wild animal locked up behind bars.

As Shakheta served his guests a dish of roast waterfowl, Pomphis regaled the family with a detailed account of his encounter with Imaro and Tanisha, explaining how he persuaded them to accompany him to Cush. With each exploit of Imaro against the slaves of the Mashataan recounted by the Bambuti, Akhini's eyes widened. Even the impassive Arkhaman had been impressed.

Later, Pomphis had added that Imaro wanted to learn the trade of a blacksmith: to make weapons, rather than wield them.

"And what better teacher, my old friend, than the owner of "the best forge of the ***shauf, bar*** none"? he concluded.

Arkhaman squirmed in his chair. Imaro had at least twenty rains; in Meroe, apprentice blacksmiths began their studies at the age of Akhini, or even younger.

"Such a good warrior could easily find a place in our army," Arkhaman had suggested, with willful harshness. Why do you prefer to learn a new trade?

Tanisha had laid a soothing hand on Imaro's arm; Arkhaman's question could easily have been interpreted as an insult. But Imaro had answered calmly, in the Cushite language that Pomphis taught him.

“Before, I used to fight. Now I have a family. When the time will come, I will fight again.

For a moment, Arkhaman had observed Imaro then his gaze had turned to Pomphis. No words had been exchanged but the eyes of the Bambuti

clearly said: ***Yes, you owe me that… and to the kandisa.***

Akhini had learned later that Pomphis had interceded on his father's behalf, long before, when a blacksmith rival to the ***shauf*** had accused him of deceiving his customers. The "customers" were in the pay of the rival, but Arkhaman could not prove it.

He had once made a dagger for Pomphis and the two men had become friends. Pomphis had carried out his little investigation and brought the matter before the highest authorities in Meroe. The accuser had been discredited and banished from the ***shauf.*** Without the help of the Bambuti, Arkhaman might have been forced to close his forge. During the rains that followed, Pomphis had never mentioned the possibility of being rewarded for his deeds. But that day...

***You owe me,*** her eyes said.

Arkhaman finally heaved a sigh.

"Let's go to the forge," he had said. The time is right for

begin.

Pomphis nodded in satisfaction. He knew the extent of Arkhaman's fears but was certain that despite his late start, Imaro might well learn ironworking.

While Shakheta, Tanisha and the daughters of Arkhaman – Akhini was his only son – had stayed behind, the men had visited the forge.
Akhini was near Pomphis while Arkhaman showed Imaro the hearths, anvils, bellows, and other forging tools. When it was time to return to the house, Imaro looked at Akhini.

The leonine lightning had vanished from the warrior's eyes.

"We'll learn together," he had said.

And since that moment, Akhini had never been afraid of the foreign giant again.

Imaro gripped the narrow iron bar that was to become a sword for Te-Neter, a noble living in the distant city of Nakwa. He placed it carefully on the bed of embers maintained by Akhini, observing the play of muscles under the dark skin of the young boy. Activating the bellows was a trying task but Akhini seemed tireless: like a pump, the large leather bag opened, closed, opened, closed...

***Soon he will be better than me,*** Imaro thought. ***He was born for that, like I was born for the sword and the spear.***

A glowing glow slowly spread across the blade; Imaro mused in Kilewo, the son Tanisha had given him five rains before.

***Five rains...***

Among the Ilyassai, the people who had raised Imaro, the boys of five rains were beginning the harsh training that would make them warriors capable of killing a lion unaided, to prove that they were men.
Imaro remembered the day he started his own warrior training. He had never known his father, and on the day of his fifth rain, his mother had been banished from the tribe. This day had marked for him the beginning of a long and painful journey towards the age of man. A journey that he would not have wanted to see repeated for Kilewo. He knew who his father was, and his mother was there whenever he needed her. When he was born, Tanisha had suggested giving him a Cushite name, in honor of their new country. Imaro had insisted on his name being Kilewo, an ilyassai name meaning "the great." Tanisha had finally acquiesced to her wish.

Imaro's departure from his clan had been done in resentment, but he wanted to teach his son certain aspects of Ilyassai culture – especially the handling of weapons. Tanisha agreed, but more reluctantly than anything. Tensions between her and Imaro had been growing for some time.

They lived in the mightiest empire of Nyumbani, a kingdom that had more warriors than all its neighbors combined, that had tamed the fiercest wild beasts. And yet, even in such a climate of security and protection, Imaro felt trapped, like an animal on which the meshes of the net are about to tighten.

He had never stayed so long in one place. The Ilyassai were nomads and once he left Tamburure he had traveled extensively, especially during his time with the ***haramia,*** those bandits who harassed the kingdoms of the east coast. Five rains wasn't much, but for someone who had never been in one place for more than a season, it was almost an eternity.

During his first years at Cush, Imaro had above all applied himself to adjusting to his new life: learning the customs of an ancient and aristocratic people; improve in their profession; to be a husband to Tanisha – married in a Cushite ceremony – and a father to Kilewo.
But this routine irritated him more and more. The untamed part of his

personality was beginning to soften, and it was an unpleasant feeling to him.

Rumors of Naama movements and machinations had filtered north, but this had yet to provoke any direct reaction from the Cush. Pomphis, who regularly traveled between Napata and Meroe, kept Imaro informed of news from the south. Once in the rain, the kandisa summoned Imaro to his palace in Napata to discuss his plans, and the role he would have to play in them.

But it was all just talk, and Imaro was a man of action. He was beginning to wonder if he would ever wash his sword in the blood of the Naamas, which had been his goal since the day he realized how much they had interfered in his life, that of Katisa, his mother, and of the father he was sure he would never know.

His feeling of unease had only increased recently, and his ***kufahuma*** was not to blame. It was something more vague, a feeling that this time of peace and inaction was about to come to an end.

Imaro's dark ruminations had put a wall between him and Tanisha, as he was unable to express his concern to her. She fully enjoyed the life they led in the Cush, and although she knew that one day Imaro would oppose the Naama, she hoped that day would come as late as possible, if ever, if the Cushites continued to confine their opponents. in their distant southern citadel.

The initial ardor which had presided over their union had cooled with the rains. As Imaro's displeasure grew, their bond grew weaker. Their arguments had been numerous during this last rain, and their nights often amounted to hours spent in tense silence.

That morning, just before Imaro left for the forge, yet another argument had broken out.

"It's time for Kilewo to begin his apprenticeship as a warrior," he said as they had just had breakfast.

Kilewo was in another room at the time. "Can't

it wait?" Tanisha asked. You... you really want

that he suffers as you suffered?

Imaro had watched her carefully. Tanisha had adapted well to the Cush. A civilized existence had added a little softness to a

already opulent silhouette. Yet she accommodated her extra weight well. The Cushite shawl and skirt she wore clung tightly to her body. Her rebellious mop of hair had long since given way to an elaborate Cushite hairdo of beaded braids. The mixture of innate beauty which was the prerogative of her people, the Shikaza, and the refinement of the Cushite style made Tanisha the most striking woman of the Cush, except for the kandisa.

However, there was less joy in his eyes now. And she was smiling less often.

"He won't suffer like I did," Imaro said evenly, masking his irritation. But he needs to know how to defend himself using the shield, the sword and the spear. And the best time to learn how to use a weapon is when you're old enough to lift it.

Before Imaro could continue, Kilewo had come out of his room to say goodbye to his father, as he always did. Imaro had lifted his son above his head and then hugged the slender, wriggling form in his strong arms. Arms that were always very gentle when holding Kilewo.

Imaro smiled looking at his son. He had understood for a long time that this one looked more like Tanisha than himself. Yet, like Imaro, Kilewo was tall for his age.

"Baba," the child had said, using the Cushite word for "father." You go make me a sword today?

“No, Kilewo. Not today. I have to make one for Te-Neter.

"But when will I have mine?" exclaimed the boy, pouting. You ***promised...***

- The next will be for you.

Eyes wide, Kilewo let out a great cry of joy and threw himself on the neck from his father. After hugging him tightly, Imaro put him down.

“Mom is taking me to see Uncle Pomphis today. He will teach me to read and write.

Imaro looked at Tanisha. Pomphis had very recently arrived at Meroe. The Bambuti had established their quarters in the palace of the ***besach,*** the royal governor of the city. He and Tanisha had obviously discussed the matter without Imaro knowing.

"He'll need those skills at Cush, Imaro," she said. Maybe more than those of a warrior.

"Then he will learn both," Imaro replied. There are times when guns speak louder than words.

"Hurry up, Kilewo," Tanisha said in a tone that admitted no challenge.

The boy had hurried out of the dining room. Tanisha looked at Imaro. Sadness and grief mingled in his eyes.

“You are no longer with me, Imaro,” she said. I don't know how, or why, but you're not with me anymore. You are here… but it is as if you were somewhere else.

She paused, waiting for him to answer something. He does not say anything. He was unable to.

“When the priestess of my people showed me your image in her vision, I never thought it would end like this.

Tanisha had regretted those words almost before she finished saying them. But Imaro had already turned on his heels and was walking down the road that led to the ***shauf-i-fayim.*** The young woman's eyes filled with tears as she watched him walk away.

The iron bar now gleamed with fabulous intensity. Imaro lifted her between his pincers and placed her on the anvil. The iron had become malleable, ready to be shaped. Akhini handed a hammer to the Ilyassai who nodded in thanks; but his mind was still distracted by his argument with Tanisha…and those words he wished he had never said.

Imaro owned a small herd in a pasture on the edge of Meroë. When he was troubled, he spent his free time there, as if reliving his early years among the Ilyassai. He couldn't explain why he clung to the customs of a people who had unjustly degraded him, even though he had finally offered them his friendship. Perhaps he subconsciously knew that the Ilyassai had made him what he was and was beginning to accept himself.

Imaro decided that when he finished Te-Neter's sword, he would go and see his cattle. And he would take Tanisha to explain to her what was troubling him.

Imaro's hammer began to rise and fall, ringing rhythmically against the hot metal. Akhini continued to activate the bellows. As always, the young Cushite marveled at the muscles

giants who played under the skin of the Ilyassai. No one had known how amazing the foreigner was until he took part for the first time in the Hakht, the annual competition attracting athletes from all over Cush and neighboring kingdoms. Pomphis had urged Imaro to participate, though the idea of fighting for any purpose other than the death of the enemy was new to him.

He had only registered for wrestling, hand-to-hand combat and javelin throwing – three disciplines from which he easily emerged victorious. The second rain, he had attempted the lift and the shot put, where he triumphed even more easily. The third rain he had added running to his list, although during the longest he had been hounded by a vigorous runner from Axum. The following rain, he had tried his hand at archery and swimming – two disciplines he had never practiced before. He turned out to be the best archer but narrowly escaped drowning during the swim. Imaro and water would never be good friends.

Yet he had persisted and learned to swim. And a few months before, he had become the first man in history to win all the Hakht events. As champion, Imaro was the most renowned man in Cush. His popularity had brought a phenomenal increase in business in the forge of Arkhaman.

Akhini was enjoying his family's newfound prosperity. Moreover, he knew that his father was the best blacksmith in the whole ***shauf;*** and his best friend was the most powerful man in the kingdom. Watching Imaro shape the iron bar into a sword shape, Akhini concludes that he was the happiest boy in the Cush, if not the Nyumbani.

Imaro had dipped Te-Neter's sword into the tempering vat three times when Arkhaman returned to the forge. Each time the hot metal hissed through the water, Imaro only left it there for a moment before placing it back on the fire, while Akhini activated the bellows. Immerse, warm; immerse, heat – that was the secret of Meroe steel, because each time the blade was tempered, a little more rubbish escaped from the metal until finally nothing was left but pure steel, shining like the moon after the dispersal of the night clouds.

For a long time, Arkhaman looked at Imaro and Akhini. The Cushite was a middle-aged man, taller than average. Clad only in white ***shenti*** that covered him from the waist down to mid-thigh, the man was a block of muscle honed by a lifetime of toil at the forge. Under his ***name*** – the

Cloth headdress worn by most Cush men – Arkhaman's golden eyes were sparkling, lively. Only the white streaks dotting the beard that grew on his chin betrayed his age.

Imaro was pulling the blade out of the tank for the fourth time when he caught Arkhaman's gaze.

“Arkhaman! he said cordially. How did it go with Gibraltar?

"As usual," growled the Cushite.

He had just delivered a panoply of ceremonial swords to a merchant from the neighboring kingdom: the Punt. Like most men in the ***shauf,*** Arkhaman hated the business part of his trade, but complied with it nonetheless since it was necessary.

"You know those Puntians," he continued. They would even bargain with death, if they could.

Imaro nodded with a smile. During the last Hakht, he had thrashed a Puntian who had tried to convince him to lose during the competition.
The man had to resort to a healer to reduce his fractures.

"Te-Neter will be here tomorrow morning," Arkhaman said, changing the subject. You think his sword will be ready?

"It will be finished before tonight."

"Aren't you telling me, boy? the blacksmith asked, turning to Akhini.

He looked up, lips tight, attentive gaze.

“Sorry, father. I was concentrating on the bellows.

'That's what it takes.

Arkhaman turned away and removed his ***nams,*** revealing short, frizzy black hair. As he put on a leather apron, getting ready for work, he cursed himself for his rudeness to his son. He knew that Akhini respected him and he understood why he almost revered Imaro, Arkhaman himself had a great admiration for the foreigner, because of his prowess during the Hakht but also for the speed with which he had learned the work of the iron.

Imaro was not the best blacksmith in the ***shauf.*** It was impossible; he had arrived too late. Arkhaman could cite about twenty craftsmen whose work was technically superior to that of the Ilyassai. But he was competent. His swords were well balanced and their edges always fine, sharp. He made up for the knowledge he lacked with a lifetime of experience in arms. And since his extraordinary string of victories

during the Hakht, people came in droves from all over Cush to buy his swords. Arkhaman knew these purchasers dreamed of obtaining Imaro's strength and prowess through the blades he forged.

***A vain hope,*** he thought. Yet no one had yet complained about Imaro's swords. Sometimes it seemed that the essence of the Ilyassai had really melted into its weapons, as they had often saved the life of their owner.

Arkhaman shook his head to clear a dark thought from his mind. He really liked Imaro, was proud to call him his friend. Yet… when he saw Akhini looking at the Ilyassai like he never looked at him, he felt bitter. In those moments, he was furious with himself.

***Am I so little compared to him?*** he wondered. ***Nope…***

A voice from outside interrupted Arkhaman's involuntary reverie.

"Hey, in there!" Can I get in without getting a hammer blow?

Arkhaman knew this voice, like Akhini and Imaro.

"Come in, Pomphis," he cried. We'll lower our hammers, but it's good because it's you.

The silhouette of the arrested entered the open side of the three-walled forge. He was a Bambuti, a pygmy kidnapped at a very young age from his native forest, Ituri Kubwa, by slavers. Although he was a head and a half shorter than Akhini, his body had adult proportions. The youth of his features belied the thirty rains he had experienced.

Pomphis wore a scholar's hat reflecting his rank in this field. He was Imaro's best friend. Each had saved the other's life more than once during their long and perilous journey to the Cush.

"Uncle Pomphis!" Akhini exclaimed, a smile lighting up her face.

For a moment the young boy stopped activating the bellows. Then he remembered Arkhaman's words, repeated over and over again: ***Never give up on a job until it's done.*** Akhini continued his work.

The iron sword-like bar clutched in his pincers, Imaro looked Pomphis, intrigued. A suspicious wrinkle creased his brow.

"Did you finish the lesson early?"

“Tanisha and Kilewo didn't come to our meeting,” the Bambuti said, his face worried. I went to your house to see what was going on,

but your door was locked, and no one answered when I knocked.

Pomphis fell silent as he saw Imaro's face change. The embarrassment that had filled the Ilyassai all morning suddenly changed into a cold warning spear. The ***kufahuma gripped him*** like a giant, invisible hand. He smelled blood, heard cries of anguish coming from the throats of those he loved...

Without a word, Imaro released the pincers. Te-Neter's sword fell to the dirt floor in front of the anvil. Ignoring the weapon, Imaro passed Pomphis and ran down the street that bordered the entrance to the forge.

"Do you think something happened to them?" Arkhaman asked Pomphis.

"I'll follow him to see," he said. I won't be able to catch up, of course, but I'll come back and tell you what I learn.

"I'm coming with you," Arkhaman offered.

- Nope. You have work. I'm sure everything is fine.

Pomphis did not want to share the inner anxiety belied by his apparent calm. He knew Imaro well, knew the astonishing sensitivity of the warrior to the works of ***mchawi,*** the magic of the Mashataan. But ***mchawi*** in Meroë, the heart of Cush? The very thought sent a shiver through Pomphis that he could hardly suppress.

As the Bambuti left the forge, Arkhaman turned to Akhini.
The words of comfort he was about to say died in his throat when he saw the boy's expression, sitting motionless behind the bellows.

Arkhaman didn't know that his son had found the leonine flash in Imaro's eyes – the same flash that had frightened him five rains earlier. And he didn't know that Imaro's eyes had terrified Akhini much more than the first time...

## 2.

## ACCUSED

Leaping over donkey-drawn carts, jostling pedestrians, startling merchants and blacksmiths, Imaro raced down the road that led out of the ***shauf.*** The inhabitants of Meroe knowing him well – he was Cush champion but wore the colors of the city – no one tried to stop his mad dash towards his house. Much like Akhini, the onlookers shuddered at the menacing glint that shone in the warrior's eyes.

Imaro's path led him to a shady valley, sheltered from the fumes of the ***shauf.*** The houses in this neighborhood were widely spaced by groves of date palms and flower-filled gardens. Most of Imaro's neighbors were blacksmiths working in various ***shauf.***
Their wives and children preferred to spend the hours of bright sunshine indoors to escape the grueling mountain heat. Also, no one witnessed Imaro's last effort to reach his door.

He lived in a well-to-do man's house, whose high rectangular walls were whitewashed, built around an open courtyard.
Ever since his triumph in the Hakht, Imaro's swords sold for as many gold ***debens*** as Arkhaman wanted to ask for. The Ilyassai's share had paid for his house and herd, and much more.

Imaro's sandals echoed on the driveway leading to his door. This one was closed, as Pomphis had pointed out. Which was normal if Tanisha and Kilewo were absent.

***Other…***

Imaro's foot crashed hard against the door. The wood was solid, but not enough to resist him. Pushing aside the debris, Imaro saw…

Some blood. ***Blood spilled in large irregular spots on the walls and floor of the entrance. Scarlet patterns, resembling those marking the skin of a gigantic leopard...***

Bodies. ***Two bodies, one larger than the other. Two bodies tortured to the point of being difficult to identify as human. Large gaping wounds, severed limbs, pool of clotted blood. They had been beheaded. Only the lacerated remains of the clothes assured Imaro that he was gazing at the corpses of Tanisha and Kilewo...***

A sword. ***Imaro's own sword, lying near the bodies of his mate and son. It was the first sword made by him that met all of Arkhaman's requirements, marking his initiation into ironworking. It was a long, broad, double-edged blade that only Imaro could wield with dexterity as he had only forged it for his arm. She was covered in a film of dried blood up to the hilt. Another arm than hers had wielded her...***

Wading through the scarlet pool, Imaro slowly approached the bodies. He fell to his knees and took the decapitated corpses in his arms, hugging them.

***Weep and mourn, Imaro,*** a voice whispered deep inside him.
***Weep and mourn. No,*** Imaro said to the voice.

His emotions were seething, rolling through him like lava from an erupting volcano. The smell of the ***mchawi*** filled his nostrils like the scent of carrion. But she was weakening. The warrior's senses told him that the marauder had fled.

But his enemies in Naama had finally struck, struck in the only place in Nyumbani that guaranteed the safety of his wife and son.
While he languished in Meroe, weakened by the calm of a sedentary life, the Erriten had plotted their revenge – and struck. A tamed warrior's family was an easy target, Imaro thought bitterly.
Even at Cush.

***Weep and mourn, Imaro.***
***Non.***

The Ilyassai watched Tanisha's lacerated shoulders. It hadn't been easy living with her these days. And it was his fault, not hers. Now he could never make amends again.

Imaro gazed at Kilewo's ravaged body. As a child, the Ilyassai had endured incessant teasing. He was called the "son of no father". When Kilewo was born, he had sworn that he would never hear such words. Now Imaro was the father of no son.

***Cry and mourn...***

***Non !***

He heard a noise behind him.

Releasing the two bodies, Imaro stood up and turned around with a smooth, slow movement. A squad of half a dozen ***makas, Meroë*** 's guard, had arrived at the entrance to the house while Imaro lay prostrate in the blood of his wife and son. A lioness wearing a leather harness accompanied them. The Cushites were adept at taming wild creatures, but the one in front of them hadn't totally succumbed to the taming.

Someone—later no one was to be able to identify the informant—had come running to maka headquarters and ***squealed*** a barely coherent murder story. The ***maka*** commander reacted incredulously and the informant disappeared before he could be questioned further. Yet duty was stronger than perplexity and the commander had dispatched a squad.

The ***makas*** watched the motionless Ilyassai. They were former soldiers, assigned to the service of the city; they had seen worse horrors on many battlefields. But Imaro - the champion - standing in a pool of his own family's blood...

The bloodstains on his arms and his leather apron eloquently accused him... His frozen, empty face, the opaque veil that covered his dark eyes, his fists that clenched and unclenched... so many signs that the ***makas*** were trained to be recognized as evidence of guilt. They couldn't know that the frozen expression of the warrior reflected the emptiness of his mind. All the love, all the kindness he had painstakingly cultivated during the last five rains had escaped from him like water from a broken calabash. And instead...

***The blood. The death. Anger. Hate. Revenge. He was again at Tamburure. He was burning and plundering the black hills again. He was again betrayed by Bomunu. He had again betrayed the trust of those who depended on him. He was Imaro again.***

***Cry and mourn...***

"Capture him, Rana," ordered Piye, the squad leader.

The lioness came forward. She was well trained, capable of delivering a blow with any paw that could knock out a man. She knew

immobilize runaways between its front legs. She would only use her teeth to save her life or that of the ***makas*** she depended on.

Rana leapt towards the bloody man standing in front of her. In the process, she stretched out her paws to grab him as she knocked him to the ground. But when she finished her leap, Imaro was gone.

Quick as lightning, he pulled away from the lioness and bent down to grab his sword. Then he spun, just in time to avoid a kick from Rana. Remembering her training, she reared up on her hind legs and threw the other two towards Imaro's armed hand. No man could have avoided this double blow. Imaro avoided him.

Rana was thrown off balance by her missed attack. Before she resumed her seat, Imaro struck, wielding the two-handed sword. The razor-sharp blade sank deep into the lioness' skull.
Imaro withdrew his sword as the beast fell. Rana was dead before she hit the ground. Blood and brain matter leaked from his broken skull.

Imaro turned to the ***makas.*** They were wide-eyed in dismay. They knew Imaro's speed and power well, having applauded his victories during the Hakht. But to kill an adult lioness with a single swing of the sword...

Dismay quickly turned to fear as Imaro approached. Moving smoothly towards them, the Ilyassai was a sight of terror. Lion's blood, woman's blood, child's blood dripped sinisterly from his body.

The ***makas*** were six, each armed with a sword and a staff. Breastplates and leather helmets protected their bodies. Two were wearing handcuffs and chains. Normally, Piye wouldn't hesitate to order his men to arrest a lone man, armed or not. But hatred blazed in Imaro's eyes…just as the muscles of his sword arm danced as he approached…Piye would have rather fought the Erriten of the Naama than faced the wild-eyed giant who was coming towards him. .

- Backward ! cried the Cushite. Everyone out of the house!

Bekhren, go get help!

The ***makas scrambled*** out, backing away from Imaro's slow approach. They couldn't know that he had no intention of hurting them. His only goal, the only thing that occupied his mind, was

to take revenge on the person or thing that executed his family.
Rana was dead because she interfered.

The still rational part of Imaro's mind knew that the ***makas*** believed him responsible for the deaths of Kilewo and Tanisha. If he surrendered, he would be imprisoned and the real murderer would have every opportunity to escape. Imaro didn't know where the assassin had fled to, but he was sure he had a better chance than the ***makas*** of finding him.

These thoughts floated at the edge of his mind, the edge that had not yet succumbed to the scarlet flames of vengeance. Sword drawn, he passed the door and found himself in full sun. When he arrived in the street, the sound of a horn reached his ears.

The ***makas*** formed a semi-circle in front of the house. To escape them, Imaro would have to hit one or two. A second horn sounds, more distant.

“Drop your sword, Imaro,” Piye said. Did you hear the horn? Soon all the ***makas*** having heard it will converge on this house. They will have lions. Can you kill more than one lion at a time? I do not believe that.
Throw down your sword, Imaro. Don't make things even more difficult for you!

***Or for us,*** he added silently.

Intrigued by the sound of the horn, Imaro's neighbors came out of their homes. Incredulous, they observed the bloody Ilyassai, surrounded by the ***makas.*** The wildest guesses spread like wildfire.

- Out of my way ! Imaro growled. If you think I killed them, you're wrong!

Misunderstanding invades the faces of the Cushites. Without realizing it, Imaro had been speaking in Ilyassai, his native language, which he hadn't used for more than five rains. For the ***makas*** his words had no
any sense.

"He's gone mad," one of them muttered uneasily. He's going to kill us all!

“Not if we kill him first,” shouted another.

Two ***makas*** rushed towards the Ilyassai, sword and club ready to strike.

- Nope ! Piye yelled, appalled at his men's lack of discipline.

The cry came too late. Like a gigantic scarlet needle, Imaro's sword leapt forward, then back. The ***maka*** who had attacked him by the

left stopped short, as if it had hit an invisible wall. Then he collapsed, blood pouring from a wound in his chest.

The other ***maka*** thrust forward, aiming at Imaro's exposed back, but its blade only touched the Ilyassai's. He had turned to parry the blow before the ***maka*** 's sword was halfway through. of its trajectory.

Imaro's parry was so powerful that the impact caused the ***maka to drop his sword.*** The Cushite's throat constricted in fear. Fighting Imaro was like fighting a lion. But the man was a ***maka :*** there was no doubting his courage. Imaro had not only killed a woman and a child, he had also taken the life of one of his comrades. Duty was duty… Stepping forward, he threw his club at his opponent's head.

The warrior's hand grabbed the Cushite's arm before he had completed his movement. Iron fingers closed around the ***maka's wrist,*** making him scream in pain. The stick fell to the ground. Imaro's face was close to the ***maka*** 's but the man only read murderous fury in the dark depths of his eyes. He did not see guilt, self-recrimination there. He waited for death.

She did not come.

Imaro hurled the man at Piye and the others, who charged at him in a concerted assault. Stumbling over the body of their comrade, the Cushites collapsed in the street. As they struggled to their feet, Imaro spun around and began to run. He wanted to get out of the valley. His neighbors scattered before him like sheep chased by a leopard. Their screams echoed off the whitewashed walls, followed by the sound of

horns.

Piye was the first to get up. Marveling at Imaro's feline speed, he swung his baton above his head and hurled the thick piece of wood at the fleeing man. He was aiming well, but the Ilyassai heard the staff whistle behind him and leaned forward without slowing his run.
The weapon hit him hard in the shoulder, without damage.

Then he fled; at first out of range of other projectiles; and finally
out of the valley.

"We're after him?" Piye asked for a ***maka .***

“Not without reinforcements of men and lions. That damned Senem takes his time to respond to our call.

“He probably doesn't believe what Bekhren tells him. You would believe it, you if you hadn't seen it with your own eyes?

Piye shook her head. Before he could answer, a piercing scream caught his attention. One of Imaro's neighbors had ventured into the house and discovered the bodies. You could read the terror on her face as she stammered what she had seen to those crowding around her. And panic spread, with cries of dismay and disbelief.

"We have work here," Piye said darkly. ***By Motoni, Senem, where are you?*** he implored silently. ***That's a bit too much for me...***

Imaro ran with long, supple strides as if he were again in the tall yellow grass of Tamburure and not in the cultivated lands of Meroe. Outside the house, he had found no trace of his family's killer – no bloody trail, no footprints or scraps of cloth. Yet he knew that the murderer could not have taken the busy street leading to the ***shauf.*** But on the other side of the valley was an area reserved for farms and pastures. This was where Imaro kept his cattle.

As he crossed fields and gardens, he saw no sign of the one he was looking for. But if the assassin knew him as well as he thought, he knew that the only way to bring down an Ilyassai without killing him was to destroy his family and his livestock.

Imaro increased his pace. In the crimson chaos that bubbled in his skull, only one thought remained clear. The Erriten had struck, taking him by surprise and attacking him where he was most vulnerable. He had to find the killer… if he moved fast he might still be able to catch up with the murderer – be he man, woman or demonic creation of the Mashataan – before the opportunity passed.

The small part of himself that had adapted to Cushite life made him regret the death of the lioness and that of the ***maka.*** Apart from the occasional game, it was the first time he had killed since arriving at Cush.
Knowing Cushite law, he knew he would have to answer for it. But another would answer before him…if he ran fast enough.

***Cry and mourn...***

***Non.***

Long before seeing the mutilated carcasses of his herd, Imaro had smelled their blood. He kept his cattle in an isolated pasture, far from those belonging to his neighbors in the valley. For the Cushites raised cattle to eat, a custom Imaro found

repulsive. For the Ilyassai, cattle were part of the tribe. We never ate it. Imaro had almost killed the first Cushite who offered him beef...

So when he at last reached his pasture and looked upon his slaughtered herd, whose blood stained the grass scarlet, whose frozen eyes stared at him as if to accuse him, whose hearts were piled up in a shapeless pyramid, in the center of the field, the last shreds of reason clinging to him were swept away by a tornado of anger and grief.

As for the killer, he had left no trails or footprints.

In the valley where Imaro resided, the ***makas*** were almost overwhelmed with the dual task of pursuing the fugitive and maintaining order among the terrified inhabitants. Many women had sent their children to the ***shaufs*** with the mission of bringing the husbands back from the forge. Others had locked themselves in their homes. But some remained in the streets, demanding to know how the ***makas*** intended to protect them from the enraged Ily

Between two attempts to assure the people that nothing would happen to them, Piye and Senem – finally arrived, with reinforcements – devised a strategy to capture Imaro.

"We'll send the lions to him," Senem said confidently. It is useless to risk the lives of other men.

"Only those two?" asked Piye, pointing to the lion and the lioness who rested calmly at Senem's feet.

“Of course, those two! What man could resist two lions?

He was stocky for a Cushite, and his mahogany skin made it clear that he was descended from the smaller of the two tribes that had united to form the first Cushite kingdom thousands of rains before. He had commanded the city guard for almost ten years, and he was in the army before that. But he had never found himself in such a situation, where a man had been so stricken with madness.

"If you had seen him kill Rana with a single swing of his sword," Piye said.

“Rana wasn't prepared to face him. Rhams and Hathi will be. Imaro may be an angry dangerous man, but he's still a man.

- I wonder.

- What does it mean ?

“You saw him during the Hakht. What he was doing there was already amazing. But today he showed more strength and speed than he ever has

shown in games. And you saw what he did to his own wife, to his son. I don't know, Senem. He may be more than a man…or less.

Senem considered Piye's words for a moment and then shook his head.

'No, he's a man, nothing more. Our job is to capture it. Let's go!

Piye nodded, knowing though that Senem was much less reassured than he seemed.

Senem bent down and started talking to the lions. He gave his orders in simple language, emphasizing certain words that the lions were trained to react to. When he was done, the two golden felines got up and trotted towards Imaro's house. Like hunting dogs, they sniffed the air and the ground near the scene of the crime.

The neighbors gave way to the lions. They weren't afraid of it because tame predators were common to the Cush. It was Imaro they were afraid of, suddenly...

Having found the scent of the Ilyassai, the lions leaped up like silent golden shadows and moved away. Their oiled trappings shone in the sun.

- What are we doing now ? asked a blacksmith, returned
comfort his trembling wife.

"We are waiting," replied Senem. Hathi and Rhams will take care of him.

***That's what you hope,*** thought Piye.

Searching the pasture for clues as to where the killer was heading after the cattle slaughter, Imaro didn't hear the lions approaching. There was nothing – no drops of blood to trace a trail out of the field, no broken or twisted shrubs, not a speck of leather or fabric. Although Imaro had few opportunities to use his tracking skills since moving to Cush, they were still in him. And the message they conveyed to him was impossible.

***Not impossible,*** he reminded himself. He had seen more incredible manifestations of the ***mchawi's power before.*** The fact remained that the killer had struck twice, then passed out, leaving only death behind him.

Imaro cursed himself. His time at Cush had dulled his ***kufahuma,*** his sense of the environment. The security he thought he had found had betrayed him, plunging him once again into the bitter conscience of not having been able to protect those he loved. In the Tamburure, he would have heard the lions.
At Cush, this was not the case.

They attacked with one blow. Imaro heard grass rubbing on fur as they leapt. Sword in hand, he turned to face the big cats. Rhams, the male, stood before him; its forepaws were aiming for the Ilyassai's head. Hathi jumped up behind him.

The Tamburure lions – Ngatun, as the Ilyassai called them – acted according to rules that all warriors learned from childhood. But the tame lions of the Cush followed other rules, rules imposed by humans. Imaro understood that he could not escape the silent and disciplined attack of the beasts.

In the brief moment of consciousness he had left, Imaro knew he could have surrendered: thrown down his sword and allowed the lions to capture him. But he was Imaro. He would not surrender without a fight. As if given a life of its own, his scarlet sword rose and plunged into Rhams' lower jaw before the lion's paws could strike.

Imaro didn't see the tip of his blade come out of the animal's skull in a bloody deluge. The whole world exploded into a sphere of pain when Hathi's paw struck the Ilyassai violently in the back of the neck.
A black curtain obscured his view, and as he collapsed to the blood-soaked floor, consciousness fled from him at high speed.

Shortly after the lions left, Pomphis arrived at Imaro's house. With him was Akhini who had begged his father to let him accompany the pygmy. When he saw the ***makas*** and locals gathered in a grim conclave outside Imaro's gate, Pomphis felt his heart skip a beat and expected the worst.

A quick discussion with Senem, who knew him well, confirmed the Bambuti's presentiment.

"But Imaro couldn't have killed them!" Akhini protested, tears in his eyes. He worked all morning with me in the forge. Tell him, Uncle Pomphis!

"He could have killed them before going to work," Senem said, not without feeling a certain sadness for the young boy.

"Then why did he come back here when Uncle Pomphis stopped by the forge to tell him they hadn't come to see him?"

Senem glanced at Pomphis. The pygmy watched him but said nothing.

"I know Imaro is your friend, Akhini," the ***maka finally said.*** But you have to remember he's not like us. He is a barbarian, who possesses a

legacy of savagery. Sometimes the barbarians... go mad...

"Not Imaro!" Akhini yelled.

But as those words left his lips, he remembered the leonine glint he had caught in the Ilyassai's eyes.

"Senem, did anyone really see Imaro kill his wife and son?"
asked Pomphis abruptly.

- Don't, admit le ***maka.***

"But I saw him kill one of my men, and a lioness," said Piye, who had heard the Bambuti's question. The foreigner will have to answer for these deaths also.

“The stranger…” repeated Pomphis softly.

A rain earlier, the kandisa had granted Imaro and Tanisha the same citizenship rights enjoyed by pure-blood Cushites. ***Now we'll forget about it,*** thought the pygmy sadly.

The distant echo of a lion's roar pierced through the murmur of the crowd.

"They found him," said Senem. But usually one of the lions comes back while the other guards the prisoner… Piye! You and your men, stay close to home. The others, with me!

"I'm coming too, Senem," said Pomphis.

"Me too," said Akhini.

Senem nodded. Makas , Pomphis and Akhini ran on the road
leading to the pastures, guided by the incessant roar of the lion.

It didn't take them long to reach Imaro's pasture. The sight of slaughtered cattle was unappealing, but after seeing what was left of Tanisha and Kilewo, the ***makas*** gave the carcasses no more than a glance. Pomphis pursed his lips, his face wearing a sinister expression; Akhini swallowed with difficulty a sudden flood of bile.

As soon as she saw the ***makas,*** Hathi fell silent. They walked through the tall grass toward the lions and Imaro, their faces reflecting varying degrees of disbelief.

The Ilyassai lay face down across Rhams' corpse; his sword came out of the lion's skull. Hathi sat next to the man and her downed male. One of its imposing paws remained on the warrior's neck, although he was unconscious. Blood poured from the back of Imaro's neck but his heavy breathing proved that he had survived the attack of the lioness.

Senem remembered Piye's words. Imaro may be more than a man…or less. Without his wanting it, the image of massacred bodies passed before his eyes. He chased her away with a shudder that left him feeling uncharacteristically uncomfortable.

Akhini burst into tears. Despite their size difference, it was Pomphis who grabs the boy in her arms.

***Here we are,*** the pygmy thought, watching the dejected Ilyassai. ***But my friend, I never thought it would start like this…***

## 3.
# PRIDE AWARD _

Imaro was chained in the dark. Although he was neither blind nor unconscious, he could barely make out anything in the Stygian darkness that surrounded him. He was in the Sakkhar, the House of the Dead, located in Napata, the spiritual and secular capital of the Cush. The city rose in the mountains, in the north of the kingdom, far from Meroë and the Gwaridi-Milima. Imaro had been a prisoner for two weeks. And for two weeks, he hadn't said a word.

***Why did you do this, Imaro?*** the ***makas*** had tirelessly asked .

***What have you done with their heads?***
***Why did you kill your cattle?***
***Why did you kill the*** maka?
***Why did you kill the lions?***
***Why did you do this, Imaro?***
***Why ?***

Imaro had not answered their questions, any more than he had spoken to the ***besack*** of Meroë. Nor had he spoken to Pomphis, Arkhaman, Akhini, or any of his remaining loyal friends, even since rumors of the atrocity he had allegedly committed had spread through the kingdom. Imaro had closed in on himself, to confront himself.

“The blow Hathi struck must have destroyed what was left of his mind,” the ***besach said,*** following another pointless interrogation by the Ilyassai before his transfer to Napata.

— Je ne crois pas, objects of Pompey.

"For having killed the ***maka*** and the two lions, he must be put to death," resumed the ***besack,*** without thinking about it adjusting the gold snake-head band around his head.

He was a thin man whose angular face seemed carved out of basalt. He seemed worried.

"However, I would like him to speak," he continued. Let him tell us why he murdered those he loved the most.

"I understand you," said Pomphis. In many ways, I share your feelings. But I, like many others, cannot believe that Imaro is the murderer of Tanisha and Kilewo.

“I find it hard to believe that too, Pomphis. I remember talking to him after the last Hakht. I had judged him as an admirable man, although a little laconic. But who else could have committed the murders?

Pomphis thought it prudent to keep his speculations to himself.

“One more thing, Pomphis: only a minority of people share your belief in Imaro's innocence. Many of the men who bought his swords had them remelted hoping that evil would not infect them.
Your unfortunate friend Arkhaman's business is nearly ruined because Imaro was working in his forge. Justice must be done, Pomphis. And quick. The people of Meroë demand it. If I make them wait too long...

“They'll demand Imaro's head, and yours,” Pomphis finished.

The ***besack*** glared sharply at the Bambuti. They were seated in one of his private audience rooms and the rank of Pomphis allowed him to stand on a chair of the same height as that of the governor. The pygmy's last sentence, although seemingly innocuous, contained a point that the ***besack*** could not ignore. The kandisa had already ordered that Imaro be taken to Napata. But the inhabitants of Meroe wanted him to be judged, and executed, in their city, not in the capital, the latest manifestation of a rivalry between the two cities which dated back to a very remote period.

"I don't need anyone to remind me of the friction between Meroe and Napata," he said dryly. She is as old as the Cush itself. I know people are furious that they can't have Imaro tried by the law of Meroe. He is under the direct protection of the kandisa. She alone can decide her fate. Not me. And as always, my people blame me for the defeat of one of my ancestors, there are thousands of rains.

"Tell me something, O ***besach,*** " said Pomphis, staring intently at the governor. Do you really believe Imaro murdered his wife and son?

The ***besack*** lowered his golden eyes, then raised them and spoke in a voice that did not tremble.

“He could have killed them before he went to the forge that morning. He had time to slaughter the cattle as well. He could have gone mad under the pressure of an existence that must have seemed extremely suffocating to him. But no, I don't believe he committed those murders.

"And who do you think is guilty?" asked Pomphis calmly.

“The Erriten,” he answered without hesitation. Somehow they hit Imaro here, in the only place that should have protected him from their evil sorcery! If they can hit here, then the balance is over. One thing still surprises me, though. Why didn't they kill Imaro? Why only his family?

“I don't think they're capable of killing him. This is why he
is so precious to us. And that's why the kandisa wants to see him in Napata.

The ***besack*** sighed.

"When it gets out in the ***shaufs,*** there will be a crowd at the gates of this palace. " How does the kandisa hope to see me master the situation, she who is well sheltered in her stone cocoon in Napata?

There was more than frustration in those words, as he and the kandisa belonged to separate branches of the dynasty that had ruled the Cush for thousands of rains. Their bonds, and their old quarrels, sometimes came to the surface in spite of themselves.

Pomphis reached into an embroidered leather bag on his lap and pulled out a parchment. He handed it ***wordlessly*** to the bag, which unrolled it and carefully skimmed the angular Cushite script covering every inch of the papyrus. The text was in the handwriting of the kandisa, whose instructions were clear. When the ***besack*** looked up, a sudden weariness and resignation filled his eyes, as if he had just heard death call his name.

"That's what I feared," he said hollowly. The ***chephet*** – the balance between the Cloud Striders and the Mashataan – has shifted. And as always, it needs to be restored. After a thousand rains of peace, the gods again declare war. And to serve the cause of these immortals, we must sacrifice our pitiful mortal lives.

For a long moment he covered his eyes with one hand, then he sat up.
His face had become a mask.

“I will obey the kandisa, of course. When the rumors of war hit the streets, people will forget their anger against Imaro. The priests of Aspelta will see to it, as they did a thousand rains ago, when we were fighting the Mizungu.

— This conflict will, in my opinion, be even more destructive than the war of the Whites, dit pensively Pomphis.

- How is it possible ? asked the ***bag.***

“Atlan's Mizungu were only tools of the Mashataan. They didn't know what was behind the atrocities they were doing to us. Naama's Erriten are more than just tools. They know exactly what they are doing and why they are doing it. They struck first and I can only pray Aspelta that our preparations will be sufficient.

The ***besack*** nodded. His eyes were the only part of his face that still seemed alive; they shone with a new determination. He stopped fingering his blindfold nervously.

"I will arrange for the transfer of Imaro to Napata; tell him I'm sorry… for him.

"No," said Pomphis, rising to leave the courtroom. I won't tell him that.

Under the supervision of Pomphis, Imaro had been ferried to Napata in a caravan bringing iron to the capital. Chained in a cart loaded with shovels, scythes and rakes, he had neither resisted nor protested against this indignity. Yet he had remained under guard during the long journey through the mountains of northern Cush. From time to time, Pomphis came to see him, to encourage him with his words. But silence was Imaro's only response.

His arrival in Napata had contrasted sharply with his first visit to the city, five rains earlier. At the time, he had wished that the kandisa could answer the questions he desperately asked about his origins and his destiny. But the kandisa had given him no answer.

Now it was she who would expect it from him; but she wouldn't get any...

Night covered Napata as the caravaneers—soldiers disguised as merchants—took Imaro to the Sakkhar. It was a series of tunnels and galleries, dug over a period of thousands of rains, into a mountain isolated from the rest of the city. The Sakkhar was the House of the Dead,

the final resting place of the kings and queens of Cush. It was there that the kandisa carried out the rites linking her spirit to those of her predecessors, there that she meditated alone on the most serious problems for her people. The Napatans had a proverb: ***It is from Sakkhar that the spirit of Cush rises...***

Imaro was taken out of the wagon and chained to a litter. A blindfold was securely tied over his eyes. The soldiers executed every move with care for they had been well warned of the ferocity of their prisoner. But Imaro did not resist. He wanted to see the kandisa as much as she herself could wish.

Four soldiers carried the litter down multiple rough, spiral staircases, ever lower. A dozen other warriors escorted the prisoner. In contrast to the superb decorations adorning most Cushite buildings, the walls of the Sakkhar were bare. Long, narrow niches had been dug, the contents of which were illuminated by a pale, cold light, with no visible source: there were coffins whose lid bore the engraved portrait of a kandisa or a jaliyin – king – of the Cush. In the House of the Dead was buried every man, every woman who had reigned over the kingdom since its creation, thousands of rains earlier. It was said that here, whoever occupied the Ivory Throne could have the wisdom and experience of dozens of predecessors.

Blinded by the blindfold, Imaro saw nothing of the multiple rows of niches. But he smelled the pungent scent of tar and natron used to preserve the flesh of royal corpses. The smell suited the bitterness of his thoughts.

The soldiers wore it gently; Imaro felt suspended in a silent sea of darkness. He never knew how much time passed during his descent into the depths of the Sakkhar, and it did not matter to him. Finally the soldiers reached their destination. Grunting with the effort, they propped Imaro's litter against a wall. Before leaving, one of them removed the Ilyassai's blindfold. When his eyes adjusted to the light, the soldiers were gone.

He was in a long, low rectangular room with the dimensions and atmosphere of a tomb. It was devoid of carvings, hangings or any other decoration. His only furniture was a few stone cubes that served as chairs. Two of them were busy.

The kandisa was present. Sitting calmly, she transformed the simple block of stone that supported her into a royal throne. She didn't wear the attributes of the monarchy, however… Her head was bare and instead of ceremonial clothes, she was only dressed in a very simple white dress that covered her from the throat to the feet. His golden eyes rested on Imaro with quiet firmness. His face, neither young nor old, showed no emotion.

At his feet were two guard lions, Belthis and Ahm. Their eyes with narrowed pupils were also fixed on the chained warrior. Above the kandisa's head hung a large sphere, radiating a saffron glow, like a captive fragment of the sun. A pale yellow light illuminated the room with morning clarity.

Imaro's eyes narrowed when he saw the sphere. He had seen another, identical one, many rains before. But this one radiated a disgusting green – the color of the ***mchawi.***

Pomphis was there, too, perched loosely on his stone seat, his feet dangling several inches from the ground. He couldn't meet Imaro's gaze. His eyes scanned the walls, as if searching for the answers to the questions that his friend could not fail to ask.

It was the kandisa who spoke first.

“Imaro, we know you didn't kill Tanisha and Kilewo. Soon all of Cush will know. But it was still necessary to bring you here in chains. Now I release you.

She uttered no incantation. His hands did not describe any strange figure. The exercise of his will was betrayed by no tension in the muscles, no narrowing of the eyes. Yet the heavy locks of Imaro's chains swung open and the shackles left the warrior's limbs like metallic serpents. When the chains fell to the ground, Imaro sprang forward, nearly fell, regained his balance, and then stood very straight.

As exhausted as he was from his weeks in captivity, the Ilyassai was still impressive. He was wearing only a torn piece of cloth, what was left of his ***shenti.*** The mark of the chains was imprinted on his shadow-colored skin. But the light from the sphere showed the tension in his muscles. And his eyes blazed with a fire that only bloody revenge could extinguish. He looked down at the chains falling at his feet.

“I could put those chains back around you faster than I took them off,” the kandisa said, reading her thoughts. And I don't think you could escape Belthis and Ahm. Curb your anger, Imaro. Curb your anger and listen!

The burning fire in the warrior's eyes only slightly abated as he relaxed his muscles and sat down beside the undone chains. On the rare occasions he had encountered the kandisa since his arrival at Cush, he had sensed that this woman was the center of tremendous magical power. But he had just observed for the first time a manifestation of his power. He decided to listen to her.

"Have you wondered, Imaro, why the ***makas*** were so quick to believe you had killed your wife and son?" Have you wondered why so many Cushites are asking for your head, just months after singing your praises in the Hakht? asked the kandisa calmly.

Imaro didn't answer, but a spark of interest crossed the ebony mask of his face.

“It was pride, Imaro. Their pride and yours. Your pride has pushed you to want to win all the trials of Hakht, without thinking of the envy aroused in other men by such a demonstration of your prowess.
Pomphis tried to dissuade you from winning all the trials. Your pride has closed your ears to this advice.

Imaro listened, impassive.

— It is the pride of all the men who have felt themselves humbled that now fuels their indignation. If you were to be tried in a Cushite court, there would be enough evidence of your guilt in the deaths of lions and ***maka*** – not Tanisha and Kilewo. But for people, you are guilty. Yet I will proclaim your innocence. The priests will do the same, and the wrath of the Cush will turn on our real adversary – the Naama.

But your name will never again be celebrated in our country… because of pride.

The kandisa fell silent. His words deeply hurt Imaro's soul.
They were real. The Ilyassai remembered the gloomy looks that Arkhaman could not hide when Akhini extolled Imaro's triumphs. He remembered the forced smiles on the lips of the men he had defeated. The words of the kandisa were true...

But this criticism did not explain to him why Tanisha and Kilewo had died. Imaro opened his mouth and spoke his first words since

more than two weeks.

- You knew…

The kandisa does not react to his accusation. She waited, knowing that Imaro had other things to say.

— During all these rains, I waited. I made weapons that I didn't use. I participated in games. I was like Ngatun in a cage. All this time, you said I had to wait before hitting the Naamas. My family would be safe “until the time is right”.

And when the time came, I was not with them. They were murdered. And you, you knew it would happen!

His voice was monotonous; devoid of emotion. His eyes never left not those of the kandisa. She held his gaze.

“No, Imaro,” she finally answered. I did not know. But ***I should have*** the knowledge. For this reason, I carry a burden of guilt.

Imaro's eyes widened for a second. Those weren't the words which he expected. The kandisa continued.

“I thought I knew what your role would be in the fight ahead of us. You would have been the random element – the unknown factor. Your power would have resided in the unexpected. Your mere existence would have destroyed the Erriten plot. For no matter how they wielded their ***mchawi*** against us, they could never have contained you without weakening their defenses against our own sorcery. As long as you were here, the Erriten couldn't strike the Cush without putting themselves in danger. Your presence bought us time, Imaro, the time we needed to strike the Naamas first.

Suddenly she lowered her head and let out a deep sigh.

'But it never occurred to us that the Erriten might also have an unknown factor. We didn't suppose for a moment that they might have their own counterpart of you, Imaro.

The latter did not show in what confusion the words of the kandisa had plunged him. Until now his hatred had encompassed the whole world; it lacked a center. At first he railed against the chains that held him down as Tanisha and Kilewo's killer fled away from him. If the Cushites had decided to put him to death, his hatred would have been directed against them and he would have sold his life dearly.

***But now…***

Eyes wide, he leaned forward. Low growls rose from the throats of the lions, in warning. Imaro did not step closer to the kandisa, nor back away.

"You know who killed them and you had me chained up while he was escaping? he growled.

"No," said the kandisa, in a serene tone, as if the Ilyassai had not raised his voice.

Pomphis, who had until then maintained an unusual silence, joined in the conversation.

"Please, Ha-Nala," he said, using the main title of the kandisa, meaning 'protector'. We have only been informed of this recently, my old friend. But we know that a strange ship from the south anchored at the port of Khomba a few weeks ago. During all this time, it remained anchored in the port... ***and in the local guard, nobody noticed its existence until these last days!***

It was Sosanu himself – you remember, the commander of the guard – who came to Napata to tell us how the memory of the boat suddenly came back to him, as if a veil had been lifted from his mind.

“There was no trace of the killer,” Imaro whispered softly. as if thinking aloud. Neither in the house nor in the pasture...

"This enemy has neither name nor face, Imaro," the kandisa continued. All we know is that he – or she – possesses a ***mchawi*** unlike anything we have ever encountered. He was able to enter and exit Cush undetected in any way. The ***mchawi*** fills this enemy's body as strength fills yours, Imaro.

"We know the ship has sailed south again," Pomphis said. Sosanu's men remembered this when the spell that sealed their memory disappeared - or was removed. Sadly, that's all we learned.

Imaro stood up so quickly that the lions were startled. They huddled together, ready to leap towards the Ilyassai if he should threaten the kandisa. But Imaro didn't care about Belthis and Ahm, or the kandisa.

"Why didn't this...this thing...attack me?" he shouted. Why Tanisha and Kilewo? What danger could they represent for the Erriten? It's me they always wanted to destroy. ***Why them rather than me?***

“I can't answer your question, Imaro,” the kandisa said. We can no more understand the actions of the unknown factor of the Erriten than they can understand yours. But all the elements of the conflict are in place now. Our armies against theirs. Our magic against theirs. You against whoever slaughtered your family. Your role is to destroy it to restore the balance of the ***chefhet.***

Imaro sat up defiantly.

“You expect me to fight for you? Nope ! If I had done what I wanted to do five rains ago, Kilewo and Tanisha would still be alive. I would have gone to Naama. I would have fought my enemy face to face, instead of waiting for him to strike me at Meroe. Fight the Erriten as you please. I will do it my way!

"And how will you do it, Imaro?" asked the kandisa. You don't know
not the name of your enemy. You don't even know what he looks like.

'I know where he comes from. From Naama. That's where I'll go. If a person has could break your defenses, I could break theirs.

"I agree," said the kandisa. And I will help you!

Noting the surprised expression on Imaro's face, she added, “As I told you,

what happened to your family is partly due to my inability to understand how the Erriten would attempt to move the ***chephet.*** The least I can do – and the least you would accept from me, I believe – is to give you the means to recognize the assassin.

Imaro's gaze reflected his skepticism.

“Please, Imaro,” the kandisa said, her voice shaking a little for the first time. I failed, although, five rains ago, I thought I had chosen the best path for you. I know you can't accept my apologies, but please accept my help!

Imaro weighed his words. He wasn't sure he could trust him.
this woman, knowing that she was using it. But if she could help him...

"What can you do, except free me?"

- Hold out your arms!

Any other man would have regarded these words as an order to be carried out immediately. Imaro didn't hear them like that. He obeyed, fists clenched at his chest.

“Stay like that. What I'm about to do won't be painful.

The kandisa's eyes looked up at the sphere suspended above her. For a brief moment the muscles in his neck tensed and the corners of his

mouth lowered.

Then two twin beams of saffron light burst from the sphere and circled Imaro's wrists. This one felt no pain – only a feeling of warmth, as if he had suddenly plunged his hands into the water of a sunny spring.

As quickly as it appeared, the ray disappeared – but not entirely. Where the light had touched Imaro's wrists were now two thin strips of a yellow metallic substance. It was neither gold, nor copper, nor bronze. The bracelets were matte, not glossy. Pulling them, Imaro found he couldn't get them off. He glared defiantly at the kandisa who had regained her dignified attitude.

“We don't know your opponent's name, Imaro,” she said.
But I'll give him one: let's call him Bohu, the troublemaker, the Pain Bringer. When you get near Bohu, these bracelets will tell you.

— Comment ?
- You will know.

Imaro looked at the bracelets. They reminded him of the chains that had fallen to the ground. They had left him but he was still a prisoner.

"I'm going to leave," he said.

"No," corrected Pomphis. ***We*** will leave. I am coming with you.

— No, I will go alone. I can't ask anyone to take that risk. “Listen to me, Imaro. I imagine how you feel, but I can help you.
You don't know the new arrivals from the east coast kingdoms in the past few months. There have been troubles in every country: riots, rebellions, assassinations. We thought we were in the presence of clues to the first Naama attack, fomented by acolytes who secretly invaded the kingdoms. Now, it seems that only one person is behind all this trouble - the one Ha-Nala calls "Bohu". It can be anywhere on the east coast. You need more than these bracelets to detect it. You need me. I know the coast better than any other. I speak all the languages. I'll help you find Bohu – or I'll die trying.

Imaro realized the pygmy was right. He had fought alongside her many times: his skill and intelligence more than made up for his size.
Imaro knew he needed Pomphis. His face softened slightly.

"Very well," he said. We are back together.

- I knew you would agree! said Pomphis enthusiastically. I have already sent a message to our friend Rabir in Khomba. ***The Epesi Nyuni*** will be ready to go to sea when we arrive.

- Reminds you. I don't fight for you! Imaro said, turning to the kandisa.

- I know it.

Imaro was about to leave but the voice of the kandisa stopped him.

“Not around here, Imaro. You have to go out secretly. Even the guards must not know that you are leaving. You and Pomphis will need to dress up to get to Khomba.

As she spoke, a section of wall behind her opened inward, with a faint crunch of stone rubbing against stone.

“Belthis and Ahm will guide you. And even if you don't know it, if you don't Don't think so, the Cloud Striders will come with you too.

The two lions trotted towards the gaping mouth of the passage. One of them glanced back, waiting for Imaro and Pomphis. The Ilyassai's eyes fell on the gold-encrusted harnesses of the lions, then on the yellow bracelets on his wrists.

***I'm like them,*** he thought, once again.

He was about to leave when the kandisa intervened.

“One last thing, Imaro. It is true that you did not kill your wife and your child. But it's also true that you killed a ***maka*** and two guard lions. Normally your punishment would be death. But the current circumstances are anything but ordinary. Even so, these acts cannot go unpunished.

Imaro looked at her without emotion, perhaps anticipating what she was going to say.

“When you leave the Cush, Imaro, it will be for the last time. Exile will be your punishment for your crime. Is this understood?

"Of course," he said.

Without adding anything, Imaro followed the lions down the passage, Pomphis at his heels. The wall closed behind them, leaving the kandisa alone in the room.

She tilted her head as if to listen…listen to the words that only she could hear. Words spoken by a thousand voices, melted into a soft but dazzling whisper. ***You didn't tell her the whole truth,*** they said.

"No, it's true," admitted the kandisa aloud.

She bowed her head and listened to the rest of the message that her predecessors wanted to convey to her, making an effort to hold back the tears that welled up in her golden eyes...

# INTERLUDE

***The black vessel was cutting through the waves of the Bahari Mashiriki, the Eastern Ocean, with supernatural speed. Not a single oar emerged from its smooth hull. The single sail was furled tightly against the mast. Yet the boat arrived with the speed of a bird in flight, propelled by the power of***

***The ship seemed to be gliding in a stretched green line across the bow and stern of the boat, just below the Bahari's surface. Crackling, hissing with dreadful energy, the line carried the boat forward, and only dissipated far in its wake. Even the bravest shark refused to approach the glowing light trail.***

***On the bridge, a figure twisted and twisted in a web of emerald light. One could not distinguish the least feature of the face or the body from this indistinct form. Only his powerfully muscled outlines were visible. The emerald canvas throbbed, lightening and darkening in a steady rhythm. With each pulse, the dark figure danced, leapt, as if struck by lightning.***

***A voice echoed harshly in the head of the one the kandisa had named "Bohu". It was the voice of Chibenguela, leader of the Erriten.***

You didn't obey us, ***she accused.***

I have improved your orders, ***answered Bohu silently.*** By doing so, I have furthered our cause. I…

You are not an Erriten! Do you think your knowledge and skill match ours? Nope ! You disobeyed us. You have altered the substance of our orders. We need to review plans prepared for more than a thousand rains. You will pay the price for your indiscipline...

***The canvas swelled in blinding clarity. Bohu's silhouette fell to his knees, curled up into a motionless ball. He didn't scream once, despite the pain that was forcing its way through every pore of his skin.***

***But in a distant corner of his mind that he had long learned to protect, including from the Erriten, Bohu's thoughts were clouded with hatred.***

Do the worst you can do, children of the Mashataan, ***he taunted silently.*** You can't kill me. You need me too much.
My pain betrays your limits...

***And the green line of the*** mchawi ***carried the black boat to the south, always further south, while the east coast faded.***

**4.**

# LONG MEMORY

Standing at the back of ***the Epesi Nyuni,*** Imaro watched the lights of Khomba disappear into the distance. The boat quietly left the harbour, making as little noise as possible and lighting no fires. In secret, Imaro and Pomphis had traveled from Napata to the port city of Khomba, in a cart carrying rolls of papyrus to be shipped to the kingdom of Zanj on the east coast. Only Sosanu, commander of the port guard, knew the true nature of the cargo.

***The Epesi Nyuni*** was a ***jahazi,*** a two-masted vessel, possessing triangular sails, a high stern and an angular prow. It was made of light but strong materials. Its name meant "the swift bird", in Kiswa, the common language of the kingdoms of the east coast.

Rabir du Zanj, captain of ***the Epesi Nyuni,*** stood near Imaro. Although taller than average and of a stocky build, the Zanjian seemed short compared to the Ilyassai. The moon was reflected on his shaved head with caramel-colored skin. Despite his wealth, Rabir only wore an open jacket and baggy pants, just like the members of his crew.

It was he who had transported Imaro, Tanisha and Pomphis to the Cush, from the Zanj, five rains earlier. He had made the journey in the midst of the fury of the rainy season, when the ***dhorubas*** – gigantic gusts of wind and rain – struck the sea like a divine hammer – a feat that had become legendary among sailors on the east coast. But ***the Epesi Nyuni*** had passed and the kandisa had rewarded Rabir well for having dared to undertake a mission he did not fully understand.

The largesse of the sovereign had allowed her to free herself from dependence on merchants supplying her with the cargo of her ship. Now he was both trader and sailor – prospering a little more with each passing rain. He no longer needed to order ***the Epesi***

***Nyuni,*** could have hired other captains, bought other boats and enjoyed the pleasures available to the wealthy men of Zanj. But he had Bahari in his blood, so he continued to travel the sea routes and take risks.

Rabir stroked his broad black mustache as he watched Imaro. Over time, a friendship had developed between the two men, a circumspect friendship. They rarely called each other by name. But every rain, when ***the Epesi Nyuni*** anchored in Khomba, Imaro visited Rabir and his crew in the Rue des Marins. And Rabir had attended some performances of Imaro during the Hakht.

The sailor's opinion of the Ilyassai had changed greatly since that tumultuous first voyage. A plains dweller, at sea for the first time, Imaro had been subject to a violent onslaught of seasickness, which only dissipated when the ship was attacked by sea creatures sent by the Erriten – in a last ditch attempt. to prevent the Warrior from reaching the Cush. Imaro's part in rescuing the ***jahazi*** had earned him Rabir's respect more than any other action could have. When Pomphis had presented Rabir with the request to use ***the Epesi Nyuni*** to search for Bohu, the captain had eagerly acquiesced.

Imaro's hands were clenched tightly on the railing. Bathed in lunar pallor, her face was indecipherable. Rabir remembered the seasickness he had suffered; he knew that the Ilyassai had not boarded a boat since ***the Epesi Nyuni*** had dropped him off at the Cush.

"It happens that the evil comes back," he said in a calm voice.

"This time the evil has nothing to do with the Bahari," Imaro said, looking at him.

Rabir looked away. He had already offered his condolences for the deaths of Tanisha and Kilewo. Imaro greeted his words with a curt nod.

It was true that Imaro no longer felt the seasickness that had almost demoralized him before. They sailed during the dry season. The Bahari was calm and the wind blew in warm, welcome gusts, unrelated to the deadly cyclones of the rainy season. Yet Imaro didn't love the sea any more now than when it had nearly caused his death. He found calm waters deceptive, even at night when star patterns were the only difference between sky and sea.

***The Bahari is like Ngatun, satiated after eating its prey,*** he thought. ***Quiet, but still dangerous.***

But it wasn't the sea that was causing Imaro's discomfort. These were the metal bands that encircled his wrists.

Pomphis joined the two men.

"How long will it take to reach Kilwa, Captain?" he asked.

"Since we pass far off the Axum, about five days," Rabir replied. But I don't know what you're hoping to find there. This Bohu of which the kandisa speaks could already be halfway to the Naama.
We are going to waste a lot of time anchoring at each port on the coast as you suggest…

'But it's the only way to be able to understand the way Bohu moves,' Pomphis intervened. What do you think, Imaro?

The Ilyassai had not heard them. He stood very straight, his eyes reduced to narrow slits. Slowly he let go of the railing and held out his hands, palms up. He twisted his wrists, as if to study the bracelets of the kandisa.

"What is it, Imaro?" Pomphis asked uncomfortably.

"The bracelets," Imaro said. Something with the wristbands...

Suddenly he turned away from the stern and ran along the deck, toward the bow of the ship, adapting his balance to the slight roll with the ease of a veteran sailor. After exchanging puzzled looks, Rabir and Pomphis followed him.

When he reached the bow, Imaro leaned dangerously overboard and stretched his arms out to sea. shares.

"Imaro, what's going on?" asked Pomphis.

The warrior turned to him, watching his wrists as if they had become foreign to his body. An expression of wonder marked his features. Wonder…and what in another man would have been fear.

“That's what the kandisa said,” Imaro muttered. I ***feel*** bohu.

— Comment cela? demanded Rabir.

Imaro was silent for a moment, then lowered his arms and began to explain something he wasn't sure he understood.

— In the Tamburure, I put my hand on the ground to feel the movements of the herds. I learned to recognize the approach of a small or a large herd, to distinguish that of the rhinoceros from that of the antelope. Thanks to the messages transmitted by the earth, I knew if the animals were calm or frightened. When I stretch the bracelets towards the sea, I feel something like this. Right now it's like feeling the hooves of a single antelope, like discovering an old track, easy to miss. The trail is thin, but I feel it.

Pomphis blinked then looked at his warrior friend in amazement. Imaro had just given his longest speech since the kandisa had freed him from his chains. And the simple words he had used had just explained the operating principle of the sovereign's gift.

***This man will never cease to amaze me,*** thought Pomphis.

"Well, Captain," he said aloud. I think we now know how we will pursue Bohu.

Rabir nodded, as Imaro turned back to the bow and looked up.
arms again.

"Go back to work!" the Zanjian shouted to his men. I hired sailors, not fools with nothing better to do than watch things that don't concern them.

"But that concerns us, Captain," said Zuberi, a tall, thin Zanjien who served as first lieutenant.

He knew full well that Rabir was righteous, despite his apparent bad temper.

“We know how dangerous this pursuit is going to be,” he continued. But we are here because we want to help the Cushites defeat the Naama. If Imaro knows things that we don't, it's only right that we find out.

“You are right, Zuberi. You, Shomari and Jaffir… come with me to my cabin. I will explain everything to you and you can pass on my words to the rest of the crew.

Zuberi and the others nodded before following Rabir under the bridge. The other sailors returned to their work. Some kept glancing in the direction of Imaro and Pomphis, who remained near the bow. And the eyes of one of them shone with venomous malice…

Kondo was a sailor whose family had served on ***jahazi*** for many generations. Two of his brothers had sailed with Rabir on ***the Epesi***

***Nyuni.*** Both had been killed on the journey to the Cush, during the storms. The ***hibi,*** creatures of the depths, half-man, half-sharks, had invaded the ***jahazi,*** looking for a passenger – Imaro. The latter, helped by the crew, had sent the fish-men back to the Bahari, but too late to save the Kondo brothers.

Death at sea was a familiar fate to members of Kondo's family. But Rabir had sailed during the rainy season, a reckless attempt at best, suicidal at worst. If Rabir hadn't set sail at that time, the boat wouldn't have run into the ***hibi*** and Kondo's brothers wouldn't have had their throats ripped out by the creatures' claws.

That's how he had reasoned, five rains earlier, when he was still a boy too young to answer the Bahari's call. Kondo had harbored a deep and bitter grudge against Rabir whom he blamed for the deaths of his brothers. And he had made a vow before Kibaru, the god of Bahari, to one day obtain his revenge.

He was now a vigorous young man of seventeen rains. He had hardly encountered any difficulties in joining Rabir's crew.
He cleverly hid his grudge and knew that the Zanjian would be sentimentally inclined to hire the younger brother to compensate for the death of the two elders. But Kondo was considering another kind of compensation…

During the trip from the Zanj to the Cush, he had looked for an opportunity to kill Rabir. None showed up. When they arrived at Khomba, the cargo had been unloaded and the crew had found a temporary residence in the Rue des Marins. In Khomba, the young avenger had had even less chance of

killing his captain because he was rarely present. Then rumors started circulating among the crew, and Kondo listened more carefully to the stories told about a man named Imaro.

This name was familiar to him. He knew that Rabir had embarked on the journey that cost his brothers their lives because of the Ilyassai. But his thoughts had been so focused on Rabir that he gave only limited importance to Imaro's role in the tragedy. Rabir was the captain.
Captains bore full responsibility for all events occurring on their ships.

Then Kondo had heard what the Cushites were saying from abroad Imaro – how the champion of Hakht had gone so mad as to slaughter his wife and son. Kondo was there when Rabir popped up in the neighborhoods

of the crew, informed them that the Ilyassai was not guilty of the murder attributed to him by most Cushites, and that ***the Epesi Nyuni*** would take him and another man on a mysterious journey south. Some of the crew members had expressed doubts about Rabir's common sense, out of earshot of the captain.

This news had sparked a different idea in Kondo's mind: without Imaro, Rabir would never have left the Zanjian port of Moshambi during the rainy season. Imaro was therefore as responsible for the death of his brothers as for that of his own family. Kondo had had no difficulty in transferring his hatred for Rabir to the Ilyassai. And his vengeful obsession had been left unaltered...

He knew that Imaro would be much harder to kill than Rabir. In fact the Ilyassai seemed so powerful that most crew members thought it would take a god to bring it down. But for Kondo, he was just a man: flesh and blood. Flesh could be sliced, blood spilled.

As ***the Epesi Nyuni sailed*** south, Kondo watched Imaro's movements carefully. Most of the time, the warrior was on deck, with Rabir and Pomphis. Three times a day, however, he went alone to the bow of the ***jahazi*** and apparently performed a ritual of stretching out his arms, palms up, holding them there for a long time before lowering them and going to Rabir's cabin. .

Kondo's comrades had told him that Imaro was "examining the Bahari" in some unknown way to help determine the ship's course. Rabir had given strict orders not to disturb the Ilyassai during
this exam.

Kondo watched, waited. He feared neither death nor failure. The voice that whispered in his mind told him that his time would come...

Kondo crossed the bridge furtively. A few moments before, the sun had disappeared behind the horizon. Twilight cast gray shadows on the boat, then black. Despite the growing darkness, Imaro was clearly visible, standing at the bow, motionless. His broad back was bare; he wore only a ***suruali,*** the wide trousers favored by the men of the east coast. That back, as muscled as it was, was an ideal target for the dagger Kondo clutched tightly in his hand.

The muffled rustling of the waves drowned out the sound of Kondo's bare feet as he approached Imaro. The Young Zanjian and the Ilyassai

were alone at the front of the ship, with the rest of the crew working elsewhere.
Kondo had mustered all the courage his hatred could give him. He didn't care about the fate awaiting him if he succeeded in killing Imaro, also didn't care about being killed if he failed.

A well-placed blow would sever the Ilyassai's backbone, rendering it powerless. Imaro still didn't move. Kondo was only a few steps away from him. Like a leopard swooping down on its prey, it leaps, every muscle in its arm and shoulder straining to thrust the dagger forward, in a deadly silver flash...

The tip of the blade sank deep into the wood of the ship.
Imaro had moved. For a blink of an eye, it seemed that his target had simply vanished. Then he saw Imaro stand out, facing him, like the shadow of his destiny. Before the young man could extract the dagger from the wood, the Ilyassai's fingers had closed around his wrist.

Imaro squeezed. Kondo screamed. The warrior took the young man's hand away from the dagger.

Pain raced from Kondo's wrist to his shoulder, as Imaro maintained his dreadful grip. An unreadable expression marked the Ilyassai's face as he watched the young Zanjian.

"Why do you want to kill me?" he asked calmly.

Kondo spat in his face.

"You killed my brothers!" he cried, oblivious to the pain in his arm.

He spat again.

"You killed your wife!"

He spat again.

"You killed your son!"

Before Kondo could spit a fourth time, Imaro's free hand closed around his throat. Watching the Ilyassai's eyes helplessly, Kondo suddenly realized that his own hatred was a mere candle compared to the hell that raged inside Imaro...

The warrior's hand slowly squeezed out Kondo's life.

- Stopped ! Imaro, leave him! Right away !

It was Rabir. The captain, Pomphis and a few sailors had invaded the bow, attracted by Kondo's cries. A few quick observations told Rabir what had happened. He saw Kondo's dagger, half planted in the railing, the saliva running down the Ilyassai's face. Imaro

opened his fingers and Kondo fell on the deck. He got down on his knees before burying his face in his hands. Rocking back and forth, he lamented, “My brothers… My brothers…

"I should have known, Kondo," Rabir said, shaking his head. I shouldn't have allowed you to sail with me. But you hid your true intentions too well.

Turning to his men, the captain barked out some orders: "Take him to the hold and chain him up!" We will leave him to his family when we reach Moshambi.

Two sailors approached Kondo. When they reached down to grab him by the shoulders, the young man jumped to his feet. Before the men could restrain him, he was out of reach.

Kondo had always known what he would do after trying to kill Imaro whether he succeeded or not. He had resolved to do the same when the object of his obsessive desire for revenge was still only Rabir.

Blinded by tears, his face contorted with anger, he threw himself overboard. He didn't scream as he fell. Just before the impact of his body on the surface of the water resounded, one of the crewmen wanted to try to rescue him.

- Nope ! said Rabir dryly. He would just train you with him. Kondo is dead. He joined his brothers.

The man who was about to dive after Kondo squeezed the edge of the hull until his knuckles seemed ready to pierce his black skin. He turned to Rabir.

"I too lost a parent when we sailed with this one the last time!"

He glared hard at Imaro then walked away. Silently, the other crewmen joined him, leaving Pomphis, Rabir, and Imaro alone at the bow, as darkness began to drive the twilight glow from the sky.

"Kondo's two brothers were killed by ***hibi,*** " Rabir told Imaro. I am a stupid fool. I never thought the boy might lose his mind over this. I guess it was me he wanted to kill before we reached Khomba. Before, no one knew you were going to board.

Imaro said nothing, but Pomphis spoke.

'Your men have a long memory, Rabir. They may have thought they had forgiven Imaro for a tragedy he was not responsible for, but that is not the case. I'm beginning to believe that Bohu isn't the only danger that
threatens us...

"If my men didn't trust me, they wouldn't be here,
dit Rabir, s'enflammant.

"But you may have taken other Kondo on board!"

- Very well ! Rabir exclaimed. If it can reassure you, I will have Imaro guarded by two men, each time he examines the sea in search of Bohu.

“I don't need guards,” Imaro said.

"Warrior, we're on ***my*** boat, and I'm still deciding what to do there!"

“We're on your boat,” Imaro agreed. But as Pomphis said, there may be other Kondos. Like the one who wanted to save him.
No guards!

The Ilyassai turned back to the bow, grabbed Kondo's dagger, and pulled it out of the wood where it had stuck. She left a large imprint there – a wound that didn't bleed.

Imaro threw the dagger into the Bahari, then he moved away from Pomphis and Rabir. His imposing figure was soon swallowed up by the shadows of the night.

"We're going to have other problems," Pomphis said, looking at Rabir.

"I can control them," replied the captain.

“Don't be so sure. Kondo's poison will flow. Imaro will have to be much more careful than he has been so far.

Rabir held her gaze but didn't answer.

Much further south, aboard a black boat, a dark figure threw his head back and burst out laughing...

## 5.

## CHAOS ON THE COAST

***The Epesi Nyuni sped*** south, following in Bohu's fleeting footsteps. When the ship arrived in Kilwa, the northernmost coast kingdom, travelers found the port city a charred ruin in the early stages of reconstruction.

"That was very strange," a port officer said, visibly upset, in response to Rabir's questions. Any ordinary fire would have started in one place and then slowly spread. This one declared itself everywhere at the same time. All was calm and suddenly, a second later, the docks, warehouses and ships were on fire! Those of us who are still alive can thank the gods. The gods and luck...

- Who did that ? Rabir asked, assuming the fire was deliberate.

- No one knows. Some say it's the Zanjians.

Noting the narrowing of the captain's eyes, the officer added,

“I'm sorry, Rabir. But there are those who do not forget that our two countries have experienced war. Others attribute the fire to the Khagga, which infest the swamps inland. But these are just rumours. No one really knows who started the fires.

Rabir exchanged a few glances with Pomphis and Imaro.

"Captain, I know you're an honest man and have nothing to do with these fires," the officer said nervously. But there are people here who talk about revenge against all Zanjians. I advise you to leave Kilwa until they have recovered their senses. And when you get to Zanj, tell your king what happened. The few sane people left in this realm don't want to fight you.

"I'll tell him," Rabir assured him.

He could have said more, much more, but Pomphis had insisted that they remain silent about the true purpose of their journey.

"Was it Bohu who caused these fires?" Rabir asked Imaro, when the three men returned to ***the Epesi Nyuni.***

- Yes. He's been there. The bracelets give me a stronger feeling, but the track is still old.

"We'll catch him," said Rabir. No Bahari boat is no longer faster than ***the Epesi Nyuni.***

A long time had to pass before Rabir realized how wrong he was. In Moshambi, the port of Rabir's home kingdom of Zanj, there was political unrest. The Mwamu – the king – had been assassinated. He had been killed in his bed, despite the squad of guards watching over the royal apartments. Even under torture, these guards had sworn by Namakungwe the Creator that they had heard nothing during the fatal night. Yet when the Mwamu's servants entered the room to begin the morning ritual of renewal, they cried out in horror. The king's bed contained the remains of a savagely massacred body, which had almost nothing human left.

The Mwamu's heirs were still little boys, the eldest not even having ten rains. Three families of the nobility were ready to compete for the regency to administer the kingdom until the child was old enough to reign. Each of these families accused the others of the murder. Zanj was on the brink of civil war and few of its inhabitants paid heed to the reproaches coming from Kilwa.

Imaro, Rabir and Pomphis were seated in a tavern in the Moshambi docklands. The day was not far advanced and they were the only customers. It was in this same place that Rabir had first met Imaro and Pomphis. At the time, Tanisha was with them.

Rabir remembered how he had faced the ***dhorubas*** to convey the three foreigners to the Cush. The idea occurred to him that this present voyage took him to the heart of perils far greater than those posed by cyclones...

“In all fairness, I should stay here and support the Muchoki's candidacy for regency,” he said, downing his fourth calabash of palm wine.

He had just returned from Kondo's parents' home. As captain it fell to her to inform the family that they had just lost another son. He had exchanged some rather harsh words with Kondo's father.

"The Muchoki have always been fair to me," he continued. That's more than I can say for the rest of the so-called nobility of this kingdom.

"Who else is applying for the regency?" Pomphis asked lightly.

He had little interest in Zanj politics, just keeping the conversation going while they waited for resupply from ***the Epesi Nyuni.*** 'Apart from the Muchoki, there are the Irap and the Kariunge. But in fact everything is played out between the Irap and the Muchoki. The Kariunge are still trying to make up for the scandal of their son, Bomunu. This one was a rotten plantain…

Rabir fell silent as he heard the sharp crack that accompanied the crushing of Imaro's calabash. The warrior had snapped it by reflex upon hearing Bomunu's name.

"I knew a Bomunu once," he growled. He was a traitor
liar and a wife thief.

“It must be the same. He tried to cheat at a game against me once.
His father paid his debt. So you knew Bomunu. What did he become ?

"He's dead," Imaro replied. I killed him. He had kidnapped Tanisha. Then both of them had been captured in the City of Madness.

Rabir's eyes widened with interest. During the rains, Imaro and himself had told each other their respective adventures. The Ilyassai had told him of Tanisha's deliverance in the city of Yahannis, the last refuge of the Mizungu of Atlan – along with Pomphis. But Imaro had never mentioned the kidnapper's name, simply calling him the Zanjian.

"That looks even more like Bomunu," Rabir said with a forced smile. Well, I'm glad you got rid of it. If he were alive, he would probably claim the regency. Bomunu like Mwamu… Yes, I'm glad you killed him, Imaro. Just for that, I'm going to give you a calabash to replace the one you broke.

As Rabir summoned a servant, Zuberi and a few crewmen hurried into the tavern. The fine features of the first lieutenant reflected anxiety.

"Captain!" he shouted. We must get back on board immediately!

- Why ? asked Rabir calmly.

“Some of the men supporting the Irap family heard you were at the port. They think you're going to ally with the Muchoki and intend to stop you.

"Damn!" Rabir exclaimed. (Then turning to Imaro and Pomphis, he added:) Now you know why I prefer Bahari to dry land. Zuberi! Nothing would please me more than knocking out some of those Irap scum, but we have another job. Gather the rest of the men. We set sail immediately. Let Kibaru take the resupply.

“That's going to be a problem, Captain. Not all men will join us. Some were Kondo's friends. They don't want to sail on the same boat as Imaro. Others are loyal to one or other of the factions vying for regency, and they want to stay for the fight.

"Then we'll go with those who still deserve to be called men!" Rabir shouted. All right, Zuberi, you told me everything. Now let's get out of here!

As the travelers left their tables, the shadows of several men suddenly framed themselves on the doorstep. There were a good fifteen of them: tall, skinny scoundrels, dressed in turbans, ***suruali*** and loose ***shati*** – shirts. Each carried a dangerous sharp scimitar.

Their leader, a dark-skinned man with a beard speckled with gris, pointa sa lame vers Rabir.

“So,” he cried. You came back here to put your money and your men at the service of the Muchoki. The Iraps aren't good enough for you anymore, now that you've made a name for yourself? We'll see how useful you'll be to the Muchoki when your guts are bare! Kill it, guys! For Irap! For Irap!

The partisans rushed forward like a swarm of insects—a surging wave of sharp spikes. Their opponents rose and drew their blades. Rabir had eight men to support him, the Irap supporters were two to one. But Imaro was on the captain's side.

The hatred he had contained since the Kondo incident exploded like a festering sore. He swooped down on the bewildered followers with phenomenal speed, wielding the sword that had slain Tanisha and Kilewo. He had sworn by Ajunge, the Spear-God of the Ilyassai, that the weapon he had

even forged would be the one that would shed the blood of Bohu. But another blood had to flow first…

Imaro's blade fell once, twice. Two Zanjians fell screaming. One held his ribs smashed; the other stared in disbelief at the bloody stump that had been his sword arm.

Two scimitars flew towards Imaro. He parried one of the blows with enough force to knock the weapon out of the wielding hand.

Swerving slightly, he dodged the other weapon which passed away from him, harmless.

Behind Imaro, Rabir cut down the partisan whose shot had missed the Ilyassai. Zuberi's blade slit the throat of the one Imaro had disarmed. He collapsed to the ground, gurgling.

Imaro knocked again. The gray-bearded leader fell backwards, his eyes fixed on the red line that divided his torso in two. Fear began to show in the eyes of the supporters. Their attention had been drawn to the man they had come to kill: Rabir. Now their primary interest was the stranger who fought like a hungry lion in their midst. They blinked in disbelief at the gigantic, half-naked figure protecting Rabir, and the murderous mask that was his face.

With their leader dejected and their zeal tempered by the fierce resistance they encountered, the partisans quickly lost their fervor for the Irap cause. As if the thought had come to them simultaneously, the survivors turned away and fled through the narrow entrance of the building. Rabir's men skewered two more from behind before the others could escape.

"Let's go to the boat," said Rabir. If I know the Iraps well, we shall soon see other imbeciles like these. If we're out of the harbor when they get to the dock, they won't chase us. They'll be far too busy hunting down Muchoki's and Kariunge's men to tire of sailing after us.

"I agree," said Pomphis.

The Bambuti had not joined in the battle. He knew what the outcome would be and had decided that he could make no contribution to it. Under a table, he had shared the shelter of the owner of the tavern who had not wanted to take part in the fight either.

Rabir and Pomphis watched as Imaro wiped his blade on the ***shati*** of one of the fallen followers.

"It's all Bohu's fault, isn't it?" said Rabir. It is he who has assassinated the Mwamu, right? Do your bracelets tell you, warrior?

But Imaro did not answer. He thought of Tanisha and Kilewo.

Lacking provisions and men, a quarter of the crew having remained at Moshambi, ***the Epesi Nyuni*** quickly sailed south. The next port on the east coast was Mwenni, the capital of Kundwa. It was agreed well in advance that only Rabir would go ashore when the ***jahazi*** dropped anchor. Because in Mwenni, Imaro had killed Chikanda, an Erriten who had come from Naama to kill him. But before he destroyed it, Chikanda had sown death in Mwenni; and Imaro himself had performed some feats the townspeople were unlikely to have forgotten, even after five rains.

Only Imaro, Pomphis and Tanisha had known of Chikanda's existence, but everyone in Mwenni knew of the deaths he had caused. Suspicion had certainly fallen on the three strangers, whose abrupt departure must have made them even more suspicious. If Imaro or Pomphis were recognized in Mwenni, they could very well be held prisoner to answer for the crimes committed by the Erriten Chikanda.

Rabir, on the other hand, was popular in the city. The Zanj and the Kundwa traded extensively and ***the Epesi Nyuni*** had done more than its share in transporting timber and ivory.

"Your presence will certainly not arouse suspicion," Pomphis said to Rabir, when ***the Epesi Nyuni*** dropped anchor.

Imaro had reluctantly agreed to stay below decks while the ship was docked.

“Ask only the right questions,” Pomphis continued. And be sure to give the Ba-Mwenni no reason to come on board. But I must say that here, there does not seem to have been any major upheavals.

"It's too quiet," said Rabir, watching the quay, leaning against the rail. It's too early for the Bahindhya fleet to be here, but there should still be more east coast ships in port.

Following Rabir's gaze, Pomphis saw that the port was practically empty. The piers and warehouses strewn along the wharf showed few signs of activity.

"Do you think it's wise to disembark, Rabir?"

The Zanjian cast a dismissive look at the pygmy then descended a rope ladder leading to the longboat in which he would be taken to the

platform. Yet Pomphis could not repress a shudder of apprehension as he saw Rabir and one of the crew rowing towards town.

Pomphis breathed a sigh of relief when they returned less than an hour later. During their absence, the rest of the crew had also felt a certain uneasiness observing the strange lack of activity in the port. The few ships anchored there seemed deserted and the few people seen on the jetties had made furtive, frightened gestures.
No Ba-Mwenni had answered the Zanjians who shouted to ask them questions.

The relief of Pomphis and the sailors at the sight of Rabir was short-lived. As the captain and his crew re-boarded the ***jahazi,*** Pomphis noticed their grave expressions on their faces. Rabir was pale despite his caramel-colored skin. The pygmy did not know what the captain had seen in Mwenni but he imagined the worst.

"Raise the anchor!" Rabir barked. Bring the rowboat on board. We leave !

"Are we still being sued?" asked Pomphis.

"No, I'll tell you everything that happened when we're in safety at sea.

The crew hastened to their task and soon ***the Epesi Nyuni was*** sailing out of Mwenni harbour. On the jetties, no one took notice of his departure. It was as if he had never existed. Or, as some of the sailors were beginning to assume, it was Mwenni who no longer existed.

It was not until they got out of sight of the town that Rabir gathered the crew to tell the men what he had discovered. Imaro was back on deck. He listened in silence, the sun's rays reflecting off the bracelets of the kandisa. Although Rabir's story caught their attention, some of the sailors couldn't take their eyes off the metal bands.

“Shuhuba and I went to ***L'Impala,*** our usual tavern in Mwenni. The owner, Kagali Mbiyu, is an old friend of mine. We have done each other many favors during the rains. Apart from Kagali, there was not a customer. There were only a few people in the streets; all had cloth wrapped around their faces, leaving only their eyes visible.

I asked Kagali what had happened. I know the area well enough to know that hiding the face is the Ba-Mwenni way of

mourn their dead. And Kagali told me.

He said the ***whole*** city was in mourning. Most of the people still alive were in the Dead Mountains, building domes – graves for their relatives. I asked Kagali if the city had been hit by an epidemic. He answered no, with something worse.

A few weeks ago, he said, in the middle of the day, ***all those who were in the port entered the water and drowned!***

Whispers of disbelief greeted Rabir's revelations. the Zanjien ignores them.

— Kagali heard screams. Along with many others, he rushed to the docks, just in time to see the latest victims enter the water. The screams were uttered by those trying to save others from drowning. The eyes of the victims were frozen, as if they no longer had control of their actions. They seemed to respond to some sort ***of call.***

More than a hundred people died that day. Since then the Ba-Mwenni mourn them. No one knows who is responsible for these deaths. Kagali lost one of her daughters. She was dragged to the bottom trying to save her husband.

What is worse, for the Ba-Mwenni, is that none of the bodies have been found. By now, most should have come to the surface. This is not the case.

— The kandisa was not mistaken in calling Bohu "He Who Bring The Pain," said Pomphis, thinking aloud.

"But how could he have done so much damage in such a short time?" asked Rabir. We should have caught up with him already. Imaro, what do your bracelets tell you? Are we getting closer to him?

- Nope. The track remains cold. It's as if we stayed in place and he moved as fast as the wind.

One of the crew members stepped forward. His name was Machupa. He was a scarred-faced Bahari veteran, whose drink had taken away many chances of commanding his own ship. But when he approached Imaro, he was sober.

"We've seen what this Bohu can do," Machupa said defiantly. He possesses magical powers such as we have never encountered. It can burn us, drown us or slaughter us while we sleep. If we catch him, what do you think you'll do, warrior?

Imaro gazed into Machupa's eyes, reduced to mere slits. It was only when the Zanjian turned his head away that he answered.

“I will kill him.

Machupa walked away. There was little left to say. Rabir gave the order to continue sailing south, towards Azania, the largest and wealthiest of the kingdoms on the east coast. The sailors obeyed but exchanged dark whispers. Some were beginning to regret not having stayed in Moshambi, even though the kingdom was on the brink of civil war.

***No one suspected what was clinging tenaciously to the keel of the*** jahazi, ***patiently waiting for the sunset...***

6.

# THE WALKING DEAD

Imaro stood as usual at the bow of ***the Epesi Nyuni*** as the sun, a blazing crimson sphere, sank behind the horizon.
The star was called Jua now, and no longer Atun as it was called in Cush. He moved freely in the sky, without following the precise course prepared by the Cushite astronomers.

The occult sensations from the bracelets of the kandisa had become as familiar to Imaro as the ***kufahuma*** learned in the Tamburure. To a barely perceptible degree, the Bohu track was felt stronger, but it was still old.

Imaro was sure that his enemy had long since left Azania.
Yet the travelers would disembark at Mavindi, the kingdom's capital and largest port, for there remained a chance, however small, that Bohu was still there.

Although no member of the crew attacked him as openly as Kondo, Imaro did not pay full attention to the bracelets. A part of him retained the ***kufahuma,*** the total awareness of the environment that would warn him of any disloyal assault as had been the case with Kondo's. Another part of his mind remained preoccupied with the heated discussion he and Pomphis had just had with Rabir.

Imaro had insisted on accompanying Rabir ashore at Mavindi, although he and the Bambuti both had very good reasons for remaining aboard the ***jahazi*** until the city peaks were out of sight.

Pomphis had once been ***mjimja,*** jester, at the court of the sha'a, the ruler of Azania. An indiscretion committed with one of his daughters had almost cost him his life. Yet he had been rescued and taken away from Azania by a Cushite scholar who soon became his mentor. More than ten rains had passed since the last number performed

by Pomphis in front of the sha'a, but the Bambuti was not easily forgotten.
Rabir had had little trouble convincing him that his best bet was to stay out of sight aboard ***the Epesi Nyuni.***

Imaro's relations with Azania were of a different order. Many rains before, the warrior had commanded an army of ***haramia*** – outlaws – that ravaged the western part of the kingdom. The ***haramia*** were becoming such a scourge that the sha'a had taken extreme measures to rid themselves of their attacks. The combined forces of the two kingdoms had finally annihilated Imaro's bandit army. Because of Bomunu's treachery, the defeat of the ***haramia*** had almost turned into a massacre. Of the few surviving outlaws, some had been captured and then executed, while the others took refuge in the darkness of the wilderness, west of the kingdoms on the east coast.

Imaro had always thought that the Azanians believed him to be dead.

"As long as your body has not been found, there will be a bounty on your head in Azania," Rabir had objected. It may well be more than five rains since that bastard Bomunu made you fall into a trap; the sha'a has a long memory. If someone recognizes you in Mavindi, Bohu will become the least of your worries.

“We've never attacked so far east,” Imaro had said. To the people of this town, I'm just a name, not a face. It's true that a soldier who fought me could recognize me, but if I pass myself off as your bodyguard, memories will have a harder time replacing me.

"Your size would betray you...

“The Azanians have seen tall people before. They know the Ndashikuya well, and the smallest of them can still look down on me. At that moment, Pomphis had entered the conversation.

"Imaro, why do you insist on landing at Mavindi?" If things continue to go as usual, we have very little chance of finding Bohu there. Did your bracelets tell you that we're catching up?

"Not much," Imaro had replied. But if Bohu is in Mavindi, I want to face him on dry land. I don't want to be a prisoner in the middle of the water.

"Then come ashore, warrior," Rabir had said dryly. But don't come don't complain if the men of the sha'a imprison you!

A certain unease lingered, like the aftertaste of bitter fruit.
Rabir and Imaro barely spoke, and Pomphis had retired to his cabin immediately after the discussion. For the Ilyassai, this was of little importance. He would disembark at Mavindi.

Stretching his arms out to sea, he thought again of Tanisha and Kilewo, the last moments he had spent with them.

***Kilewo, I would have taught you to become a warrior, or a scholar, or both if you had wanted it.***

***Tanisha, I would have given you more of myself.***

For the first time since long rains, Imaro found himself thinking of his mother, Katisa. When he last saw her, he only had five rains. She was leaving, turning her back on the ***manyattas*** of the Ilyassai, and leaving him alone to face the rigors of ***mafundishu-ya-muran,*** the training of warriors.

***Mother-I-knew, why didn't you take me with you?***

And as this old wound reopened, he thought of his mysterious father.

***Father-I-don't-know, where are you?***

Suddenly Imaro felt a throb in his wrists, as if lightning raced through his forearms. Yet it was absolutely not painful.

For the eternity of a single moment, Imaro gazed at the bracelets as if he had never seen them before. Jua had fled, leaving only a faint crimson light to outline the horizon. Yet the bands glowed softly, as if preparing to return to the golden light from which they were born.

***Boo!*** thought Imaro, struck by a presentiment. So he heard the cries of the crew and the slapping of spongy flesh on the deck…

As quickly as it had come, the strange feeling disappeared and the bracelets stopped glowing. In one rush, Imaro turned and drew his sword. The night was darkening; he saw only the dark shapes of the sailors, struggling against even darker shapes climbing the rail.
A brackish odor invaded his nostrils as the cry of one of the crewmen rose.

"They are ***dead !"*** By Kibaru and Mungu, they are dead – ***and they are walking!***

Bare steel in hand, Imaro ran into the fray. The Zanjians swore, sometimes retched, as they fought what appeared to be an army

corpses emerged from the Bahari.

Despite the semi-darkness, the animated bodies were horrible to see. Despite their nudity, the decomposition had already taken such toll that their gender was difficult to determine. Their faces were masks of horror: severed noses, teeth glinting behind decomposed lips, eyes no more than gelatinous masses glinting with a flash of green light.

Le vert du ***witch.***

These waterlogged carcasses having been men and women should have served as food for the sharks. But the bodies bore no trace of the attentions of sea scavengers. The only alteration they showed – other than decay – was in their fingertips.
There the flesh had been torn away, or devoured, leaving only the bare bones, twisted like claws. Claws that could tear a body... or cling to wood.

The dead moved awkwardly… but inexorably. By plunging daggers and swords into the flaccid flesh, the sailors of ***the Epesi Nyuni*** knew intuitively who they were dealing with: the Ba-Mwenni who had drowned in their own port. Drowned Ba-Mwenni, resuscitated by the ***mchawi*** of Bohu...

Terrified beyond reason, the sailors continued to fight against the onslaught of the undead. A man thrust his sword again and again into a soft, gelatinous belly. It was not blood that flowed from the wounds inflicted by the blade – only black, putrid water. The corpse closed its gaunt fingers around the sailor's throat and choked him.

The undead aimed for throats, faces, eyes. They offered no defense against the steel that was chopping, tearing their flesh. They didn't need it: they were already dead.

Rabir attempted to gather his men into a single combat group. But he was hampered by the Ba-Mwenni who tried to bring him down. The living dead far outnumbered the crew, and more corpses continued to climb the rail. Despite their titanic efforts, the Zanjians were overwhelmed.

Then Imaro's voice echoed above the shouts, screams and sword thrusts.

"Don't try to kill them!" Mutilate them! Aim for hands and heads!

The Ilyassai swooped down on the undead like a lion attacking a horde of hounds. Fists, feet and blade, he created a battle space within the mass of corpses. His sword began to spin destructively in the waning twilight.

The speed and power of his blows astonished the few sailors who could see him while fighting their own battle against the undead. As the Ilyassai wielded his sword, waterlogged arms and hands began to litter the deck. Bodies already dead once fell and hindered the progress of the others.

The Zanjians were quick to imitate Imaro. Using their weapons more cunningly, they slashed the extremities of their assailants. Arms, hands and bloated heads began to pile up on the deck. Bodies already dead prevented their companions from advancing.
Yet the undead remained more numerous and more than one man fell, buried under a mass of Ba-Mwenni with active claws and teeth. Even Imaro couldn't maim them all before they overwhelmed the sailors.

Rabir and Pomphis fought side by side. Rabir aimed his scimitar at the heads and hands of the undead, while the pygmy slit their shanks. At the first sounds of battle, Pomphis had rushed out of his cabin. When he saw the undead, his mind tried to dismiss what his eyes showed him. Then he had accepted it.

***The drowned Ba-Mwenni have not been found… Oh, Aspelta, I should have understood right away!***

Pomphis knew well the enemy he and Imaro were pursuing. The Bambuti had spent long hours studying books and scrolls in the libraries of Napata and Meroe, immersing themselves in what the Cushites knew of the ***mchawi.*** The evil depravity practiced by the devotees of the Mashataan had sickened him; but he realized that this knowledge would be an important weapon in the inevitable confrontation between the Cush and the Naama. Some of his undesirable knowledge concerned the methods employed by followers of the ***mchawi*** to revive the dead and control bodies whose souls had fled.

His heart leapt in his chest when he realized that the living dead must have clung like barnacles to the hull of ***the Epesi Nyuni,*** underwater, far from the sun. Only the rays of Jua could slow the movements of a corpse animated by the ***mchawi...***

It was then that Pomphis realized what was the only way to save their lives; despite Imaro's prowess, the undead were too numerous to defeat by force. Avoiding the bony claws that plunged into his face, he shouted at Rabir, “Under the deck! We must all go below decks and batten down the hatches! Darkness is the ally of these creatures, sunlight their enemy. You have to go under the bridge and wait for daybreak!

Rabir's scimitar cut off the hand that was still aimed at Pomphis' face.

"Do you think I'm going to give them my bridge?" he shouted furiously.

He was bleeding from half a dozen wounds inflicted by the living dead; his breathing was heavy.

"It's the only way, Rabir!" The living dead have no spirit. They can't hurt the boat any more than they hurt us if we stay here. It will soon be dark, Rabir. The night is their element. When the sun rises, they will become corpses again. Trust me, captain. I know what I mean.

The captain savagely punched two undead who rushed at him. They fell, armless, allowing Rabir to think for a moment. He then realized that Pomphis was right.

- ***Guys!*** he shouted, raising his voice above the din, as Imaro had done moments earlier. Make your way to the hatch. We go down under the bridge. It's an order !

He only had time to repeat that command once before the undead were upon him again. He knew his men would obey him, even if they questioned his courage. Night was only a few heartbeats away.

When he heard Rabir yell his order, Imaro roared in frustration. Fighting near the bow of the ***jahazi,*** he and a few crewmen were beginning to win over the undead. Their blades had put out of action three dozen Ba-Mwenni and the fallen bodies blocked the passage of the others. The undead became easy targets for the crew's daggers and scimitars.

Imaro had even begun to drive some of the attackers back into the Bahari, an action that greatly encouraged the men fighting alongside him.

The Ilyassai was certain he and the Zanjians could defeat the undead. By the time he had understood what they were, he had remembered one of the first precepts of the ***mafundishu-ya-muran :*** "Even the strongest enemy has a weakness." Find it and you will win! »

Imaro had detected the undead's weakness and now Rabir the retreated.

***It's his boat,*** the warrior thought angrily, before making his decision.

"Let's join Rabir!" he shouted to his comrades.

As Imaro turned toward the center of the ***jahazi,*** an undead man reached one of the Zanjians next to him and flicked his gaunt fingers down the man's throat. The sharp claws sliced through an artery. Blood spurted into Imaro's eyes.

Blinded, the Ilyassai involuntarily lowered his sword as he ran his free hand over his face. During this moment of inattention, four undead threw themselves on him and made him fall on the bridge. Their teeth seized him by the throat, while the claws sought the vital places...

"Imaro has fallen!" shouted a sailor.

Panic grips the beleaguered Zanjians. If Imaro could be taken down by the undead, their own chances of survival seemed slim.

The Ilyassai was far from panic. The stench of the living dead disgusted him; the contact of their teeth and claws increased his rage tenfold. Dropping his sword, he rolled from side to side in an attempt to dislodge his assailants.

The undead did not possess exceptional strength. Their power lay only in their soulless determination and insensitivity to mortal blows. And that was not enough to defeat Imaro.

Rolling over one of his opponents, he found the fulcrum he needed for his arms and legs. With a supreme effort, he heaved himself up, chasing the undead away from him like a lion chasing its young when it grows weary of their games. He looked for his sword. The night was already almost too dark for him to see but he found her, fallen behind one of the creatures.

Imaro shoved aside the coming undead and retrieved his blade. Chasing what was left of the Zanjian's blood from his eyes, he saw the sailors looking at him without trying to hide their admiration. For a moment there was

more undead to fight. Imaro knew that the men fighting near him would continue the battle if he chose to ignore Rabir's orders.

He then noticed that total darkness had almost fallen and came to the same conclusion as Pomphis. Darkness was the very essence of the ***mchawi…*** Already the green glow that shone in the eyes of the undead was more powerful; corpses moved with more ease, less randomness… soon the crew would lose the advantage of their weapons and organization.

"Let's join Rabir!" Imaro shouted again.

When Imaro and his comrades found Rabir near the hatch, the last twilight lights had disappeared from the sky. The moon and stars cast a faint reflection of daylight on the Bahari. Sailors and undead lay in shadow.

But the travelers had no trouble distinguishing friend from foe, for the creatures' eyes burned like green torches within their drowned faces.

"Raise the hatch!" Rabir shouted. Come down, everyone! Imaro and I we'll hold on as long as we can!

Struggling in the darkness, Zuberi managed to clear the hatch opening. As the men began to descend the steep staircase leading below the bridge, Imaro and Rabir took up position on either side of the opening and began swinging their swords furiously. They no longer sought to immobilize their enemies, but to contain the inexorable advance until all the crewmen were safe.

Rabir lacked the physical advantages of Imaro but he fought for his ***jahazi,*** a motivation that made him strike the undead like a lunatic. Heaps of cadaverous flesh littered the ground between the two men; it was as if the sky were delivering a shower of carrion. The undead's advance was thwarted when they ran into a wall of bodies distended by seawater.

Soon there was only one man left on deck except for Rabir and Imaro. It was Machupa, the scarred sailor who earlier had spoken out against the Ilyassai.

"Leave him here, captain," he said quietly, pulling Rabir's jacket. Leave him ; let them finish it! Then we can go back to

Moshambi…

With a stifled curse, Rabir kicked Machupa which sent him rolling down the steps. Her gesture unbalanced him for a moment; one of the undead managed to slip past his guard and fell down the stairs following Machupa. Immediately cries of anger and terror arose as the sailors fought the reanimated Ba-Mwenni.

"Get down first," Rabir said, turning to Imaro. I know how to close interior hatch. Not you.

He hoped the Ilyassai had not heard Machupa's treacherous words. Giving a final swing of his sword, Imaro whirled around and started down the steps. Below, the sailors gave wild cries as they struck the Ba-Mwenni in the darkness.

Rabir managed to reach the stairs and closed the hatch behind him. With trembling fingers, a sudden sign of his fatigue, he closed the latches, forbidding them to be opened. Below the pandemonium continued.

Rabir knew his men would start taking each other down by mistake if he didn't act immediately. But Imaro's voice rose before he could open his mouth.

- A light ! Someone turn on a light so we can see what we do!

Rabir nodded. Imaro had anticipated what he was going to say. The warrior was a leader of men even though Rabir knew he didn't want to be...

Despite the confusion, a torch was found; the flint struck the steel sharply and an orange, pallid light chased away the darkness; what was then revealed interrupted the swear words that lingered on the lips of the sailors.

The Ba-Mwenni had been torn to pieces, its fragments strewn across the floor. Even in the dark, the crewmen had struck more often than they had missed. The limbs and head were severed; the torso was a mass of tattered flesh. A pool of black water was rapidly widening beneath the body.

But what had caused the sailors' throats to constrict nauseatedly was the severed head of the Ba-Mwenni. In the bloated ruin of her face, her eyes still shone with an emerald flame...

That night no one slept aboard ***the Epesi Nyuni.***

Below deck, the crew's attention was divided between the corpse – now covered by a sail – and the shuffling footsteps of the dead who paced the floor above them, tireless. Pomphis had been well

Inspired: From the sounds coming from above, it didn't seem like the undead were damaging the ***jahazi.*** They were just walking; aimlessly, nonstop.

Without a helmsman, ***the Epesi Nyuni*** drifted with the wind, her crew gathered in the hold, her deck trodden by the feet of Mwenni's dead.

And Machupa watched Imaro. His eyes burned with an evil gleam,
just like those of the living dead...

## INTERLUDE

***Three figures were slowly descending the spiral staircases of the Sakkhar. One belonged to the kandisa; the second to the high priest of Aspelta, dressed in his jackal mask; the third was that of a little girl.***

***As they passed the dimly lit niches where sovereigns and sovereigns of the past rested, the kandisa communicated with each of the royal corpses. She stretched her mind forward, seeking a final bath of strength and wisdom to support her in the upcoming readjustment of the*** bedside table. ***She listened carefully to the archaic whispers echoing lightly within her...***

***Soon they reached the central hall; the chamber of the golden sphere from which she had launched Imaro on his journey south. The kandisa led the little girl to one of the stone blocks used as seats, then sat down near the child. The priest remained standing, standing near the entrance to the Hall of the Dead Royals.***

***The kandisa took the little girl's hands in hers. The child had seen nine rains pass, and in all that time she could not remember an occasion when she had been so close to being alone with her mother. In Cush, the heirs to the throne were elevated in secret and were not presented to the kingdom until the death or abdication of the kandisa or jaliyin. The future rulers of Cush could only master the knowledge that had been theirs since the coming of the Cloud Striders, thousands of rains before, after an extremely long time of study***

"Soon this will be your place, Nefkha, ***" said the kandisa to her daughter.*** Here you will find peace, even when the world outside threatens to crumble. Here you can be alone with our ancestors.

***Nefkha looked up at her mother's. Hers were like rain-swept amber, as she tried to staunch a wave of tears. Her face was the younger image of that of the kandisa; yet***

***age and care would give it its distinctive features. Like her mother, she wore a very simple white dress that covered her from throat to toe.***

***Tears began to flow down the ebony curves of the child's cheeks.***

"Oh mother, I'm not ready, ***" she whimpered.*** There are too many things to know – too many things I haven't learned…

“You will learn them here.

"Do you really have to die?" Should I lose you now?

- I will be here. With all the others, all those who sat before me on this throne. I won't die soon, Nefkha. Before the readjustment of the chephet begins, we will meet again. You have to go now.

***The child put his arms around the kandisa's neck and cried silently on the white dress. The Sovereign held her against her for a short moment, then gently freed herself from her daughter's embrace.***

“Go with Sostris now, Nefkha. I can't be late anymore. ***Reluctantly, the child let go of the hands of the kandisa and walked towards the priest.***

***She slipped her hand into that of the man in the jackal mask and looked one last time at her mother.***

“I hope I'll be ready when I need to be, ***” she said.***

***Without more words, Nefkha and Sostris disappeared into the shadows beyond the entrance.***

***The kandisa remained alone in the bare room.*** No, not alone, ***she corrected herself.*** Never alone…

***The golden sphere floated just above his head. As she got up, she could touch it with her fingertips. For a few more moments, she savored what freedom she had left. Then this enjoyment became more painful than the fear of what it would become.***

***So she got up. With a slight movement of her shoulders, she let the dress fall to the ground, forming a delicate white mound at her feet. The kandisa was naked and wore no jewelry. Her body had full, soft, round shapes. But he gave off an impression of solidity behind the delicacy of his midnight skin.***

***She raised her hands to the globe.***

"The Mashataan fill many vessels with their power, ***" she whispered before her fingers touched him.*** You choose to complete only one. Which method will prove to be the best?

*Then she touched the sphere and was immediately enveloped in a blaze of golden light.*

*And throughout the kingdom of Cush began preparations for war.*

*The priests of Aspelta exhorted within their temples the faithful who felt a righteous anger rising within them, just like a thousand rains before.*

*And Imaro's name, no longer anathema in light of the revelations of the priests – the Naama had killed his wife and son – became the rallying cry of the Cushites.*

*And in the shaufs of Meroe, blacksmiths like Arkhaman and Akhini fashioned weapons for the coming struggle to readjust the chephet...*

## 7.
## " BECAUSE OF YOU "

When the exasperating walking of dead feet finally ceased, the men of ***the Epesi Nyuni*** knew that the long night was over. By mutual consent, they had let the single torch go out and had not replaced it. None of them cared to look at the Veil Mound, or to remember what lay below.

The sailors had cursed the width of the few portholes below deck. They weren't wide enough for the undead to squeeze through, but were also too narrow for the crew to push the pieces of the corpse they had dismembered into the Bahari.
Yet the portholes were open; partly to dispel the stench of the doubly dead Ba-Mwenni; partly to allow travelers to witness the arrival of dawn.

Although the night passed in a tense atmosphere prohibiting sleep, the men were wide awake when daylight filtered through the portholes. They were in a hurry to emerge from their prison. Yet Zuberi expressed a doubt that lingered in the minds of most
others.

“It is true that the undead keep quiet. But what will happen if they just wait for our exit? They may be gathered around the hatch, ready to kill us...

"We'll have to take the risk," Rabir said curtly. His tone reflected the irritation he felt towards Zuberi who had just put his finger on an anxiety he was trying to get rid of.

"I don't think they'll bother us," Pomphis said.

"How can you be so sure?" asked Machupa.

Pomphis stood by the sail. Without hesitation, he lifted the end
and discovered the head of the Ba-Mwenni.

"Look at his eyes!" he ordered.

They obeyed. The corpse's eyes were fleshy globes, staring blankly at the deck floor. The evil green glow of the ***mchawi*** that had given him life was gone.

- You see ? said Pomphis. Daylight robs them of the power to move.

"If these things are strongest at night, why didn't they wait until it was completely dark to attack us?" Machupa asked aggressively.

Imaro spoke before Pomphis could respond. He hadn't said anything since they had taken refuge here.

— Bohu is playing with us. He plays with us like Chui, the leopard, plays with his prey. We are chasing him, but he will decide when we catch up with him.

"I don't want to catch him!" shouted Machupa. (Then turning to Rabir, he added:) Captain, when we anchor at Mavindi, I will leave. Unless, of course, you decide to turn around and go back to
Moshambi.

Several men murmured their agreement with Machupa. Rabir almost flew into a fit of rage but he held back his anger, knowing that scolding the sailor would only earn him the sympathy of others.

***This is your last trip on*** the Epesi Nyuni, ***my friend,*** he silently promised himself.

“Azanians don't like Zanjians at best, Machupa,” he said aloud. And Zanjian deserters are even less popular.

Deliberately turning away from Machupa, Rabir raised his voice, taking the your tone of command which he knew respected by his men.

“Now we're going back. I hope the living dead are
returned to Bahari when Jua got up. If it's not the case…

He put his hand on the hilt of his scimitar.

Then Rabir climbed the stairs, reached the hatch, and began to untie it. Behind him, Machupa slid a finger down his throat, a gesture whose significance could not be ignored. Some of the crewmen looked at him in disgust. But there were others to nod thoughtfully and contemplate an action that would never have crossed their minds a few weeks ago.

Amidst a cloudless sky, Jua lit up a scene of horror. The bridge of ***the Epesi Nyuni*** was covered with the bodies of dead Zanjians and Ba-

Mwenni died twice. Nine sailors mingled with the rotting undead. The survivors turned their heads away to escape the stench rising towards the sun.

"We'll have to throw the bodies overboard," said Rabir. It is a dreadful task. I'm not afraid to say that the thought of touching these things makes me sick. But it must be done.

"May I make a suggestion, Captain?" asked Pomphis. It's going to look even more disgusting than touching the undead, but we have to make sure we don't get attacked again when Jua goes to bed tonight. You remember Imaro's idea of chopping off the heads and hands of the undead to make them harmless. It worked and would have done it even better if there weren't so many of them. I propose that we mutilate all the bodies on the bridge in this way before throwing them into the Bahari.

"It's not a bad idea," said Rabir. What do you think, Zuberi?

'It's disgusting but it has to be done,' replied the arrested man.

"That's not all," said Pomphis.

- What now ? Rabir asked, visibly irritated.

“We have to do this to all corpses, including our own dead.

"Enough, pygmy!" scolded Machupa, standing by the hatch. Our comrades will be immersed decently. Approach the steel of one of my dead friends and I'll throw you into the Bahari!

Other crewmen raised their voices in support of Machupa whose lips were marked by an evil smile.

Rabir felt he was losing control of his men. Never before had one of its crews come so close to mutiny. This realization frightened him more than the onslaught of the undead could have done...

"Pomphis is right, Machupa," the captain said, apparently calm. You would notice it if you thought before you spoke. Can't you understand that the power that brought back the Ba-Mwenni could do the same with our own dead? Could you raise your sword against the animated corpse of one of our own, even if he tried to cut your throat? Do you want to stake your life on it?

Machupa did not attempt to counter Rabir's arguments. It was enough for him to have sown another seed of doubt in the minds of the crew.

Imaro, who had been silently following the altercation between Rabir and Machupa, suddenly stepped forward. Machupa took a step back. His fear of the giant ilyassai

was far more important than the hatred he had harbored since the beginning of the trip. But Imaro didn't care about him.

The warrior stopped in front of the body of one of the undead. The corpse lay in a grotesque position, limbs askew like those of a broken doll. He had no more hands. Imaro turned back to the crew who had split into two groups – one surrounding Rabir, the other Machupa. The captain's followers were more than twice as numerous as their counterparts.

"It was because of me that the undead attacked," Imaro said.
It is I who will clean the ***jahazi.***

Without adding anything, he bent down and grabbed the flesh of the Ba-Mwenni. His fingers dug into spongy skin, then he lifted the body and tossed it overboard. He approached another corpse. This one no longer had a head but its hands were intact. With two quick swings of his sword, Imaro slashed his wrists. Sheathing his weapon, he threw the corpse into the Bahari. He was approaching a third when Rabir spoke.

“Zuberi, I'm asking you to help Imaro clear the bridge. Make sure it's washed afterwards. I don't want any undead stench on this boat after dark. Machupa, come with me to the stand. I want to talk to you while I lead us away from the hazardous course followed during the night. Thanks to Kibaru, we didn't run aground...

Having given his orders, Rabir turned away and headed for the stern, treading carefully over the carpet of corpses. His thin face reflected his annoyance, but Machupa followed him.

The other men hurried to help Imaro rid ***the Epesi Nyuni*** of evidence of the previous night's carnage. They worked calmly but efficiently. More than a pair of Zanjian eyes rested on the Ilyassai's broad back. And more than one mind was invaded by a thought that repeated itself like regular drops of rain on a roof.

***Because of him… Because of him… Because of him…***

Machupa did not carry out his threat to abandon ***the Epesi Nyuni*** to Mavindi. The dispute over Imaro's landing remained unresolved. Because ***the Epesi Nyuni*** did not drop anchor at Mavindi.

Although the ***jahazi*** had strayed far from its initial route, the wind had nevertheless carried it towards the south. When the last of the dead—Ba-Mwenni and Zanjiens, Pomphis's reasoning having prevailed as to how to dispose of the deceased crew members—was

thrown into the sea and the bridges were brushed, Rabir made ***the Epesi Nyuni resume*** the route that would take her to Mavindi.

When the travelers came within sight of the steeples of the port city, however, two Azanian warships came out of the port like hunting dogs. The ships were fully equipped for battle, Jua's light reflecting off the metal of weapons, armor, and boarding grappling hooks. Sailor-soldiers covered their decks. The warships maneuvered quickly to intercept ***the Epesi Nyuni.***

Driven by the ***pombe,*** the crew of the ***jahazi*** had spread, from the taverns of Cush to those of Kitwana, many boasts about the speed of their ship and the qualities of its captain. As the warships approached, with obviously hostile intentions even to the most naive of observers, the sailors' claims were subjected to the most ruthless of tests.

It was out of the question to fight. ***The Epesi Nyuni*** was a merchant ship, built for trade and not for war. The only possibility was flight. The escape… With more than half of the crew dead or deserted.

As Rabir barked short, precise orders, still at the helm, ***the Epesi Nyuni*** spread its web wings and began to fly away from the Azanians. The wind swelled the lateen sails. The crew executed the maneuver like a musician pulling a melody from the strings of a gigantic lute. Rabir handled the tiller against the rolling waves with the skill of a magician lover.

And ***the Epesi Nyuni*** split the waves like a stone thrown on the water by the hand of Kibaru. The Azanians continued the pursuit with relentlessness but their ships were too full of men and armament to reach the speed of the ***jahazi.*** They kept losing ground, as if they remained motionless in the same wind that was pushing ***the Epesi Nyuni*** south.

As the Azanians disappeared behind the horizon, Rabir continued to drive the boat forward with all the speed he could bear.
Each of his men worked for two, and if the speed of their escape did not soon discourage the Azanian pursuit, fatigue would soon befall them, nullifying all the advantages gained. While Jua was shining

High in a cloudy sky, Rabir harangued his men to work until their muscles cracked like the wood of the boat.

It wasn't until he was sure he had outrun the Azanians that the captain relented and allowed the crew to rest. If the pursuers persisted, the men of ***the Epesi Nyuni*** would be recovered enough to continue the escape when the sails of the warships appeared on the horizon.

Rabir remained at the helm. He had demanded as much of himself as of his crew. Satisfied to have regained control of the ***jahazi,*** he allowed himself for a moment the enjoyment of this success.

Then his eyes found Imaro who had done more than his share of the job during the escape despite his limited seamanship. Rabir frowned. For the first time his thoughts mirrored those of his men. ***Because of you…***

"This was no ordinary harbor patrol," Pomphis said as he
that the crew ate and drank the contents of the ship's reserves.

Most of the men were gathered near the hatch leading below deck. Zuberi took over from Rabir at the helm. There was no sign of the Azanians, so the men were enjoying their first real respite since the undead attack. Yet their relaxation masked the sharp edge of exhaustion. It was as if they knew they were in a lull to be followed by horrors even worse than those already endured.

"I agree," said Rabir. If we had stayed, those warships would have sunk us. But why ? Azania and Zanj are at peace.

"You forget the war between the Cush and the Naama," Pomphis reminded him. It is a war that can involve everyone. At these

words, several eyes landed on Imaro. The Ilyassai remained impassive.

“I wonder if we left Bohu behind in Mavindi,
s'interrogea Rabir.

"No," said Imaro quickly. I always feel it in the bracelets; I the stronger sense. We are still following his trail.

"A lead that will lead us all to death!" barked Machupa.
Captain! When will we return to Moshambi?

"When we find Bohu."

— Only the port of Mpemba and those of Kitwana remain. No one goes south of Kitwana – these are forbidden waters: the waters of the Naama. If Bohu is not in Kitwana, will you sail in the waters of Naama?

Rabir hesitated, watching Imaro and Pomphis. Then he remembered what the kandisa had told him a few rains before. And knowing that his own crew could become as dangerous a threat as anything the Erriten could conjure up, he answered Machupa's question.

- Yes.

Machupa's eyes came into furtive contact with those of a few other sailors.

***Now,*** those eyes cried.

***No,*** replied his family. ***There aren't enough of us. Soon…***

***Now…***

At that moment the mutiny that Machupa both desired and feared might well have broken out, but a cry from the lookout caught the attention of the entire crew.

"Sail in sight!"

The sailors froze, ready for immediate action if the Azanians continued to pursue them.

"How much and in what direction?" cried Rabir, looking up at the man perched on top of the mast.

- Only one. Coming from the south!

At these words the crew's tension eased. It seemed unlikely that a ship coming from the south could be Azanian. It was possible that he was Mpembian; they were now in the waters of that kingdom. Or…

"Is it Bohu?" Pomphis whispered to Imaro.

- Nope. I feel the same in bracelets. They would tell me if Bohu was approaching. There's nothing new.

Rabir heard the question and the answer and was slightly reassured by the Imaro's belief that sailing had nothing to do with Bohu.

"Is it a warship?" he shouted at the lookout.

- Nope. Looks like a fishing boat. He's not moving. We won't delay not to catch up.

'When we reach it, we will discuss with those who guide it,' said Rabir. Maybe they can tell us why the Azanians are attacking

the innocent boats that anchor in their ports.

The crewmen approved of Rabir's decision. For some, visions of mutiny were temporarily put aside. For Machupa, an unwanted relief replaced the fear that had bitten his insides moments earlier.

It was indeed a fishing boat: nets hung on its sides like spidery clothing. They were empty. The single veil was torn as if a rainy season storm had ravaged it. But the rainy season was months away and in the dry season there were no such storms.

As ***the Epesi Nyuni*** approached the small fishing boat, three figures on its deck waved their arms weakly. Rabir ordered ropes to be thrown to allow the three strangers to board.

They came, climbing slowly along the ropes, half-naked and as badly damaged as their ship. One of them was a tall, thin, gray-haired, middle-aged man. His bearing marked him out as a Bahari veteran. With him was a young girl in her early teens. Her breasts were still just budding under a series of V-shaped scars that marked her chest. Of all the peoples of the east coast, the Mpembiens were the only ones to find beauty in scarification. The third was a boy of about ten rains. All three had a shadow of bewilderment in their eyes, as if they had seen things they wished they could forget.

"Aren't you Rabir of Zanj?" asked the man, as soon as his feet touched the bridge.

The captain was not surprised to be recognized by the stranger. ***The Epesi Nyuni*** was familiar with the quays of Mpemba, the port city which gave its name to the kingdom.

"It's me," admitted Rabir. And you are…

— Sefu from Mpemba. This is my daughter, Pili; and my son, Mwiyu.

“Well, Sefu, Pili and Mwiyu, you are invited to share our food and water as you tell us how you were brought this far from your home port. And maybe you have news from Azanie? When we attempted to anchor at Mavindi, two warships attacked us without question.

Sefu's eyes and those of his children widened in fear, then the fisherman recovered.

"I'll tell you what I know," he said. But the whole east coast is traversed by a wind of madness; the things I tell you today may not make sense tomorrow.

Rabir nodded, showing his compassion, then ordered a crewman to bring supplies to the Mpembiens.

The news Sefu fed to the travelers' hungry ears was bizarre beyond any speculation they had had since their encounter with the undead.

On hearing that ***the Epesi Nyuni*** was heading to Mpemba, Sefu urged the travelers to think it over. Mpemba had been invaded by poisonous snakes. Mambas, boomslangs, cobras… in a single night of terror, it had seemed that all the snakes living in the brush west of the city had crawled through previously unknown cracks in the walls, to sow death in the narrow streets.

“There were hundreds of them,” Sefu said, as his children shivered at the memory. They behaved like mad dogs, hitting us, biting us as if we were hated enemies.

We tried to fight them but they were too numerous and too fast… too fast! They bit Kamiara, my wife. She is dead.

The two children began to cry. Surprising Imaro's gaze, Pomphis asked a silent question: ***Bohu?***

Grim-faced, the Ilyassai nodded.

“So we took our boats—those of us who were still alive. We sought refuge in the port. And the snakes swam after us! We sailed away, leaving them behind. We saw them swimming back to town, like a conquering army, writhing on the piers. Snakes are the only living things in Mpemba now. Snakes… and vultures.

"You say others sailed with you, Sefu," Rabir remarked. Where are these others?

— A storm arose shortly after we were out of view of the harbour. It was a ***dhoruba…***

- Impossible ! shouted Machupa. The rainy season will not start before months!

Sefu turned to him, his gaze filled with contempt.

"Do you think I tore my own veils, Zanjien?" Do you think I drowned my own bridge?

"After what we've seen on this trip, I don't think we can say anything is impossible anymore," Rabir said, his tone heavily ironic.

“I don't know if anyone else survived the ***dhoruba,”*** Sefu continued. I didn't see anyone, but the storm may have scattered them all over Kibaru's kingdom.

"Were you diverted from your course seeking refuge in Kitwana?" Rabir asked, knowing that relations between the Mpemba and its southern neighbor were generally friendly.

Sefu looked at Rabir as if he had slapped him, then collected himself and said, “You can't know that. Kitwana was conquered by the Naama

Everyone on ***the Epesi Nyuni*** listened intently to Sefu telling how the Naama had invaded Kitwana and taken Mlongo, its main port. It was rumored that to accomplish this task, the Erriten had commanded an army of demons.

— We in Mpemba knew we were next. We were preparing our defenses when the snakes attacked. No, Captain, we weren't going to Kitwana. We just wanted to stay near the harbor long enough for the snakes to go away and we could take back our town.

"And Majnun, King of Kitwana?" asked Pomphis suddenly. Do you know what what happened to him?

Sefu noticed Pomphis for the first time and marveled at the Bambuti's miniature stature, especially compared to the silent giant standing beside him. Pomphis' face wore an expression of great concern. It was to this feeling that Sefu replied.

“Some of the few Kitwanians who sought refuge in Mpemba said their king was alive, hiding in the hills west of Mlongo. But that's just a rumour. Why are you asking the question?

'I used to know him,' said only Pomphis.

"And Azania, Sefu?" asked Rabir. As soon as we approached Mavindi, two warships chased us as if they intended to sink us immediately. Do you know what's going on there?

“Only rumours, Captain – this time from those who fled the North...

Mavindi had been attacked by an army of ***haramia :*** thieves, outlaws, bandits, dissidents, all assembled into a force that had struck so hard that the Azanian army had found itself ill-prepared. Although the soldiers successfully defended the sha'a palace, the rest of the city had been looted. Many neighborhoods had been reduced to smoking ruins.

The ***haramia*** had sprung up like seeds after a heavy rain. They were said to be led by a leader believed to be long dead.

"But the bandits had to be prosecuted when they lost their initial surprise advantage," Rabir said. Why didn't the Sha'a soldiers surround them, massacre them?

“They stole boats from the harbor and fled south,” Sefu said. (His face hardens into a mahogany mask.) I hope they ran into the Naama.

“That leader who led the ***haramia…”*** began Rabir.

“Rabir, no…” interrupted Pomphis.

But the captain ignored him.

"Did this leader have a name?" he asked.

“Those fleeing mentioned a name, yes.

"What was he?"

— Imaro.

## 8.

# AN EXCHANGE OF SHIPS

The eyes of all the crewmen turned to Imaro. Lips curled back, he stared back at them furiously; his was marked with the leonine glow – the same one that had frightened young Akhini not long before.

“My name,” Imaro growled through gritted teeth. That mangy dog stole my name! Sefu hadn't heard Imaro's name before he mentioned it himself. He observed the menacing mask that was the face of the warrior and took a step back hearing the bitter words of the Ilyassai.

- You ? stammered the Mpembien, raising his hands in a defensive gesture. Is it you N'tu-nje? At

that moment, a score of scimitars came out of their sheaths and slipped into a score of hands, like long curved fangs filling the mouth of a beast that had just been awakened. The only unarmed arms were those of Rabir, Imaro, Pomphis and the Mpembiens.

Although he was not the first to draw his weapon, Machupa finally held his mutiny. Even if he hadn't acted, the others would have. The news from the south that Sefu brought confirmed the sailors' doubts about Bohu's pursuit. In the battle that had been played out within each of them between their loyalty to Rabir and their fear of the ***mchawi,*** fear had triumphed. ***The Epesi Nyuni*** would not sail in naama waters…

Machupa was quick to seize the opportunity.

“I'm sorry, Rabir,” he said. We return to Zanj. And you don't have voice in the

chapter. At the sight of bare steel, Sefu hugged his children and backed up to the railing. He could see the tips of the scimitars waving in front of Rabir and the two men beside him: a pygmy and a giant unlike those on the east coast, named after a famous bandit presumed dead. Sefu's sanity was beginning to waver.

- ***Jinn! Djinn!*** he cried, a little saliva escaping his lips.
Rabir du Zanj, why are you sailing with a demon on board?

— Silence !

Rabir's voice cracked like a whip. Sefu's mouth clicked shut as it closed; the tips of the Zanjian scimitars wavered.
Their leader had brought them through fights and storms during many rains. Old habits of obedience and loyalty could not die in a sudden spasm of rebellion. Yet the crew's guns remained drawn. Jua's light shimmered on the polished steel.

Ignoring the scimitars, Rabir turned to Sefu and began to speak. He explained to the Mpembiens who were Imaro and Pomphis, the reasons for the trip of ***the Epesi Nyuni.*** He assured Sefu that it was Bohu who had stolen Imaro's name, that the latter had never plundered Mavindi, nor fled south with a stolen fleet. The mutineers listened as attentively as the Mpembiens, because they did not know everything about Imaro, the kandisa and the imbalance of the ***chephet.*** But they did not sheathe their blades.

When Rabir finished, Sefu's eyes were filled with more amazement than fear or madness. He apologized to Imaro who remained impassive as he accepted his words. The crewmen had made their decision. It was Zuberi and not Machupa who spoke for them – the loyal Zuberi who had drawn his scimitar with the rest of his comrades.

“We'd love to fight the Naama,” he said. No one here likes them. But not like this. Not in this place. If we sail south, we'll throw ourselves into their hands, into the hands of Bohu. At least in Zanj we will be able to fight in our own way, in our native territory.

His voice choked in his throat. As he continued, a little wetness shone in his eyes.

“Captain… Rabir… You can't imagine how much it costs me to be here pointing a gun at you. But I... can't go on. None of us can.

— Rabir.

It was Imaro who had spoken. The crewmen suddenly remembered what the Ilyassai had done in Moshambi's tavern. They remembered how he had held off the advancing undead. The memory made the handles of their weapons slippery. One word could have

make them stick their blades into Imaro's flesh while his sword was still sheathed. But none of them had the will or the courage to utter the word; not even Machupa whose hatred for the Ilyassai was intact.

"I'll go south alone," Imaro said, pointing to the fishing boat floating near the ***jahazi.*** I will go in there, if the Mpembiens want to lend it to me.

"Did you say alone, Imaro?" Pomphis interjected. Do you really hope to leave me behind now?

— The bracelets tell me that Bohu is still ahead of us. I believe he is in Kitwana, with his masters. This is where I have to go. For you, it would be too dangerous...

“Not half as dangerous as trying to maneuver a boat alone, retorted Pomphis.

"Please, warrior," Sefu said. I would gladly give you my boat, but what would my children and I be sailing in then?

“You can come to Zanj with us,” Zuberi suggested. You have nothing left in Mpemba. You will be safer on ***the Epesi Nyuni*** than drifting on your fishing boat. (Then he turned to Rabir:) I'm sorry, Captain. It is not my responsibility to...

“You can take on all the responsibilities you want. I'm going south with Imaro and Pomphis.

“Rabir, no! shouted Zuberi. You can not…

Yes , ***he can,*** Machupa almost said. But he had what he wanted and managed to swallow his words before they escaped his mouth.

Rabir eyed the crew members one by one. None could meet his gaze, not even Zuberi.

"It's my boat," said Rabir calmly. I saw him build in the building sites. I was at the helm when the Bahari first wetted her hull. I took him on his first trip. I have always been its captain because the men who operated it have always trusted me. This is no longer the case. Now you trust people like him.

He gestured scornfully to Machupa. This one quivered involuntarily. Rabir turned to Sefu.

"Here's a deal, Mpembien," he said. Your boat against mine. I do not want nothing more to do with ***the Epesi Nyuni.***

— Rabir… Non…

Zuberi was openly crying now. All the blades had lowered. Booted feet writhed uneasily on the deck.

Rabir ignored the crew.

"Sefu, do we have a deal?"

“I give you my ship, Captain Rabir,” Sefu said proudly.

He sat up. Once again he was father, provider, man.

“My boat belongs to you. I don't think I will see him again, nor will you. But if there's a chance that you and these outsiders can do something – anything – to avenge Mpemba, to liberate Kitwana, then you can take the boat. It's broken but it served me as well as ***the Epesi Nyuni served you.*** Her name is ***Kamiara*** – like my wife.

Rabir resta silencié un instant.

“When you get to Moshambi,” he said finally. Go to my sister, Afiya. She will keep you and your children under her roof until you decide what you will do.

"You don't have a wife?" Sefu asked.

' I had two: the Bahari and ***the Epesi Nyuni.*** Now I only have one. Thanks for the ***Kamiara,*** Sefu.

Pomphis and Imaro also thanked Sefu for giving them his ship. But the Mpembien barely heard them. He observed the crewmen. Most had sheathed their weapons. They seemed to be looking for something to say but couldn't find any suitable words. Rabir, Imaro and Pomphis were also silent as they prepared to descend along the ropes to board the ***Kamiara.***

"You will need food and water," Zuberi said to the last moment. You can take whatever you want from the reserves.

"I won't accept anything from you," said Rabir coldly. We will disembark to support ourselves.

Pomphis was about to protest, then he looked at Imaro and Rabir. Both men's faces were marked with a fixed, determined expression. Suddenly Pomphis realized how much the Ilyassai and the Zanjian were alike...

Without adding anything, the three outlaws disappeared over the railing of ***the Epesi Nyuni.*** They jumped into the ***Kamiara, cast off*** and floated free. The wind blowing through the torn sails gently pushed the fishing boat south.

The ***Epesi Nyuni's rail*** was dotted with sailors watching the small boat sail away. Most looked on with regret; some with satisfaction. And some felt absolutely nothing…

Although the ***Kamiara*** was an old ship and had suffered a fair amount of damage during the supernatural ***dhoruba ,*** it was still capable of going to sea. Rabir appreciated the way Sefu had maintained it.
However, if they were to go to Kitwana, some repairs were necessary. The sail had to be patched and the breaches in the hull sealed.

The remainder of their first day on the ***Kamiara,*** Rabir assigned Pomphis and Imaro to these tasks. The Ilyassai did the heavy work, while Pomphis showed skill in mending the sail. Rabir noticed that Imaro was becoming a competent sailor. But he would never be a good one: he didn't have Bahari love in his blood.

When Jua sank behind the western horizon, Rabir was satisfied: the ***Kamiara*** was ready for the challenge he knew he and his companions would face. Sefu and his children had left only a little water and dried fish, but that would be enough until they disembarked. Rabir was sure he could avoid being discovered by the Naamas: he knew the bays on the east coast better than most men the bodies of their wives.

With mixed feelings of anger and regret, Rabir mused on his decision to turn his back on ***the Epesi Nyuni.*** Anger consumed him. He had been betrayed by men he trusted and that betrayal would stay with him like grass rooted in bitter soil.

Regret attacked him more subtly. He knew he would never hold the helm of ***the Epesi Nyuni again,*** not even if he survived the conflict between the Cush and the Naama. He might very well die on dry land and not on the Bahari, hated the idea of being buried rather than thrown into the water.

Yet Rabir did not regret his decision to help Pomphis and Imaro. The Naama owed him the lives of too many men who sailed with him. They would pay for each and for taking his ship, for he knew it was fear of the Naamas that had really caused the mutiny.

He looked at Imaro. The Ilyassai sat at the bow, lost in his own dark thoughts. Earlier, he had confided to Rabir that the bracelets indicated a further decrease in the distance separating them from Bohu. It was likely that it had completed its trail of destruction in Kitwana.

It was there that he would land; Rabir was sure of it. Bohu had no more reason to pursue towards the Naama now that the war had started.

The captain didn't like the idea of going ashore. His feelings about it were the same as Imaro's about water…

Although he realized that the Ilyassai was not in a communicative mood, Rabir wanted to talk. Understanding that he would gain nothing by approaching Imaro, he turned to Pomphis, who never refused a conversation. The Bambuti watched the last crimson glow of the setting sun.

“You said you knew the King of Kitwana,” Rabir said. The one who was driven from his throne by the Naama. How did you know him? I didn't know you went to Kitwana.

Pomphis' lips curved upwards. It was one of the few smiles he'd given himself since the undead attacked.

“I didn't meet him in Kitwana, Captain,” he replied. I've never been there. It was in Mavindi that I met Majnun, when I was ***mjimja*** in the sha'a palace.

"What was he doing in Mavindi?"

The memory made Pomphis chuckle.

“He was sent there by his father. Majnun was the youngest of Al-Imamu's three sons and he had been on the throne for many rains. He was a vigorous man. He could have stayed there until Majnun and his brothers also became old men.

The two elders planned to seize the throne before Al Imamu's death. But they were afraid of their father. Majnun did not fear Al Imamu but also had no ambition to ascend the throne. He only liked women, ***pombe*** and adventure. On many occasions, only the intervention of his father had saved him from death at the hands of outraged fathers whose sons had fallen before his sword in a duel, or whose daughters had fallen... I believe you can guess the stay, Rabir.

"Then why did his father send him to Azania?" Rabir asked without being able to suppress a smile. Hearing you talk about that Majnun, I wouldn't be surprised if he started a war.

Pomphis laughed, throwing his head back.

"Without me, that might have happened!" Majnun's father had sent him on a diplomatic mission, you see. He wanted her to gain some experience in the art of negotiation. But Majnun

preferred to "negotiate" in the bedrooms of high-born ladies. I met him while I was entertaining the sha'a. We liked each other instantly. I guess he liked me because I wasn't – and still am – not pretentious. And I liked him because he treated me like a man, not like some kind of exotic pet… A “hairless chimpanzee,” as some of the other sha'a servants called me. And not always behind my back...

Pomphis was silent for a moment, furious with himself for having reopened a old wound.

'Anyway,' he continued, 'I kept Majnun out of trouble while he was at Mavindi. I made sure he wasn't discovered by the wrong people during his romantic adventures, and I showed him around parts of town his father probably wouldn't have wanted him to see. We parted as friends.

"And he became king," Rabir said dreamily. How did it happen ? I thought you said he was the third son.

“I'm surprised you don't know the story, Rabir. I believed you aware of everything that happens on the east coast.

'Only to the docks. I'm only interested in politics when it affects trade. And I never did much business with Kitwana.

“Interesting,” Pomphis muttered. Well, Majnun's two older brothers are dead. Killed in battle, according to the official version. But I've heard rumors that things weren't that simple. Shortly after the death of the two brothers, Al-Imamu himself fell ill and passed away. Only Majnun was left to sit on the throne. From what little information has reached the Cush, he has done very well, better than anyone who knew him before could have expected. Until today, of course...

"Why look for him?" If he is alive he can only be a fugitive in his own realm.

"We need help," said Pomphis abruptly. At Cush, we had no idea that the Naama would put an end to their isolation so quickly, so completely. The Erriten will certainly finish what Bohu's attacks began. Now our mission goes beyond simply finding Bohu and destroying it. We must organize the resistance against the Naama in the south while the kandisa gathers its forces

in the north. Majnun could become the focal point of this resistance. The Kitwanians may still rally to his banner to become a thorn in the side of the Naama...

“That's true… if Majnun is alive.

“From what I remember of him, I'm sure he is.

"You convinced me of the merits of fighting the Naama rather than hunt down Bohu, said Rabir. But him, do you think you can convince him?

He bowed his head to Imaro, still seated at the bow, still and silent as a shadow. If the warrior had overheard all or part of Pomphis and Rabir's conversation, he gave no sign of it. He thought of Tanisha, of Kilewo, and of a life that no longer belonged to him...

Total night had fallen. The world was plunged into darkness of sky and sea. A sudden gust of wind swelled the patched sail of the ***Kamiara, sending*** the fishing boat heading south.

Pomphis did not answer Rabir's question.

## INTERLUDE

***While Rabir and Pomphis were discussing the political situation in Kitwana,*** the Epesi Nyuni ***had made a wide arc in Bahari, preparing for the long journey to bring him back to Moshambi. Under the best of circumstances, turning into the wind was a difficult manoeuvre, a task requiring the full concentration of the crew. But a question quite different from the maneuver obsessed the minds of the***

***Who commanded*** the Epesi Nyuni? ***That was the question every crew member asked.***

***Zuberi had always been Rabir's second. Normally he should have become captain after the departure of this one, if not owner of the This time, however, Machupa was arguing with Zuberi for his rights to command, arguing that, having been the first to suggest mutiny, he should in return be made captain for saving the lives of the surviving crewmen by refusing to prosecute. towards Naama.***

***Machupa's argument was weak, and he knew it. But he persisted and found sailors to support him – though few of those who supported Zuberi.***

***The argument escalated, harsh words were hurled like javelins, and scimitars were drawn. Machupa and Zuberi fought a long and bloody duel to determine who would take the place of the man they had both betrayed. Machupa hated Rabir; Zuberi had loved him like a brother. The two Zanjians had developed a keen antipathy for each other that consumed their common sense as they punched and tore each other apart like panthers vying for prey.***

***No one else crossed swords. The sailors could only watch with morbid fascination Machupa and Zuberi fight, until neither could stand. They fell together, in the blood that seeped between the planks of the bridge. Crimson-bladed scimitars slipped from fingers too weak to hold their handles.***

***Their mouths formed curses, in a breath escaping from ravaged lungs. Before nightfall both men were dead. And*** the Epesi Nyuni ***no longer had anyone to guide him.***

***The dispute between the crewmen died with Machupa and Zuberi. None of the surviving Zanjians possessed the skill or experience of Rabir, Zuberi, or even Machupa. It was then that Sefu, who remained with his children while the duel raged, spoke of the years he had served on the*** Mpembian jahazi ***before choosing the quieter life of a fisherman.***

***The Zanjians eagerly agreed to allow him to take the helm. It was tacitly assumed that the Mpembien was also captain – at least until they anchored at Moshambi.***

***Sefu maneuvered the*** jahazi well, ***guiding it in a straight run to the north. The distance between*** the Epesi Nyuni ***and the*** Kamiara ***increased with each passing minute.***

***Sefu's honor had given the*** Kamiara ***to Rabir.***

***Rabir's pride had given*** the Epesi Nyuni ***to Sefu.***

***The two sailors had made a deal, finally...***

## 9.

## THE BROKEN THRONE

In a palace surrounded by rocky peaks, the negus of Axum was lost in thought, alone in the throne room. His ascetic, lean face was dominated by a hooked nose and penetrating dark eyes. His skin was the color of polished copper; beard and hair were black, dotted with gray streaks. When he had ascended the throne of Amhar, thirty rains earlier, he had abandoned his real name to become Negus Negusti – King of Kings.

The negus no longer sat on Amhar's throne. The great stone chair was knocked down, broken… destroyed by order of the monarch. He had also given up his crown and his robes; he wore only ankle-length breeches and a ***chamma*** —a piece of white cloth draped over his narrow shoulders. Pacing the empty throne room like a caged lion, the negus thought bitterly of the disaster that had befallen his kingdom.

The Cushites had struck without warning, large waves of soldiers rolling in from the northern border. Taken by surprise, the Axumite forces had been swept away in a battle that had not lasted half a day.
Meeting no resistance thereafter, the Cushites had marched in triumph towards Gondur, the capital of the kingdom surrounded by mountains.
A courier galloped ahead, carrying a message from the kandisa herself.

***I only want to meet you alone,*** said the papyrus roll, written in perfect Axumite script. ***Order the soldiers to lay down their arms.***
***We don't need more bloodshed...***
The negus had sent a response signifying his submission. He did not have a choice. The Cushites controlled all the access roads to Gondur. A siege would shatter the soul of the kingdom. ***Alone,*** the kandisa had said.

And only it would be, the negus had decided. He had dissolved the Hakut Ras – the Council of Nobles – and sent the priests back to their rock-hewn temples to question Alamak the Moon, to find out why she had abandoned her people. He had further decreed that no one in Gondur should bear arms of any kind until his business with the kandisa was over. This last decree had flayed his soul...

He was seated on the dais which once supported his throne. He let his mind invade his mind with derisive thoughts about what he might have done had the Cushites not attacked. The feud between the Cush and the Axum was ancient, dating back thousands of rains, when a golden-eyed shaman decided to worship Atun the Sun, while his dark-eyed brother chose to honor Alamak the Moon. The Cushites had become the people of Atun, the Axumites the people of Alamak.

Although the Cush grew mighty and prospered with the rains, the Axum never shared its neighbor's good fortune. The people of Alamak had retreated to their lair, extracting meager sustenance from a harsh and barren land. In Gondur they had built a city of scowling turrets and willful stelae that rose to the stars serving the moon. ***Atun and Alamak cannot shine in the same sky...***

All the children of Axum learned this proverb when they were still old enough to suckle their mother. The history of Cush and Axum was an endless series of wars interrupted by a few periods of peace.
The two countries had fought on the same side only once: a thousand rains earlier, to rid the Nyumbani of the Mizungu of Atlan. And when that had finally been accomplished, the Axum had once again turned against the Cush.

The negus had reigned during a period of calm. He had not once attacked the Cushites, knowing that the people of Atun were too big, too powerful; the war could only have resulted in a loss of Axumite territory. He had watched, waited, built for when the Cushites would show a single sign of instability. At that time, the negus had vowed to strike as the predator attacks the weakest member of the herd...

Recently his spies had brought him information suggesting the possibility of trouble in Cush. Something about a murder - crime of passion or infanticide. There were also rumors of impending conflict between the Cush and its northern neighbours: the kingdom of Zaghawa and

the city-states of Alodia and Dongola. Dongola and Alodia had long been vassals of the Cush. According to the negus' informants, they were preparing to transfer their loyalty to the ambitious Zaghawa.

Their attention distracted by internal unrest and conflict in the north, the Cushites finally seemed vulnerable to an attack from the south. The long wait would soon be over, the negus had thought. Soon all his rains of patience would be rewarded...

Then the Cushites attacked. The wars of the past were only skirmishes compared to the massive invasion organized by the kandisa. The spies of the negus had been mistaken – or had been deceived: the soldiers of the Zaghawa and of the independent cities marched alongside the Cushite troops.

Axum was conquered. At that moment the negus knew that the Hakut Ras were meeting in secret conclave to decide which of them would be the next occupant of the throne of Amhar. He knew he would be assassinated as soon as the kandisa left the palace. He was ready.

Whispers from the street below his palace reached the negus' ears. He understood that the kandisa would not be long.

Betraying a fatigue that his sixty rains did not justify, he got up and walked to the large window through which he heard the murmurs. He leaned over and looked down the street. His people lined both sides of the gathering place: men, women, and children old enough to witness the end of their world. The Axumites spoke quietly as a cool wind blew over Gondur, seeping into cloaks and ***chamma.*** Men in military garb dotted the crowd: leather armor decorated with fringes made from lions' manes. According to the decree of the negus, none of the soldiers bore arms; they looked like captive falcons.

Not one looked at the window of the palace.

The first Cushite contingent appeared between the open gates of Gondur. It was a troop of horsemen. Brightly colored feathers flapped on the skull shields of the horses and the helmets of their riders. The crowd fell silent. The only audible noises now were the clatter of hooves on the stone and the sigh of the wind. The latter gave a voice to the pain that the Axumites were too proud to show.

A company of infantry accompanied by war lions then entered the city. The mountain sun reflected on the

harnesses and equipment for men and animals. The soldiers kept their weapons sheathed and the lions did not roar as they passed between the lines of sullen Axumites.

Behind the infantry came a second group of cavalry. These were not mounted on horses, but on ***gunkwu,*** an animal that only the Cushites knew how to tame. Superficially, the ***gunkwu*** resembled the common rhinoceroses, but were larger, more massive than the irascible inhabitants of the plains. Instead of a horn on their nose, ***gunkwu*** wore a pair of conical spikes on their foreheads, extending to a point beyond the nostrils – as if two spears were pushing them there.

A steel scabbard surrounded these horns; metal armor protected their massive legs and bodies, just like those of their riders. Even more than the war lions, the ***gunkwu*** were living weapons. The street shook under their feet.

The last participant in the Cushite procession exceeded in height the ***gunkwu*** themselves. It was an elephant, adorned with a cloth embroidered with gold. His tusks curved forward like ivory scythes. An ornate, closed cabin was firmly attached to the mastodon's back, just behind its mahout.

The negus turned away from the window. He knew who was the occupant of the cabin. He would see her soon enough.

The kandisa was alone when she entered the negus' throne room.
Seeing her, he couldn't suppress a gasp of astonishment: she was enveloped in a coat of golden light, as if she were wearing a garment woven with the rays of the sun. The luminescence was so bright that the negus put an arm in front of his eyes to protect them.

Then, furious with himself for showing his fear, he lowered his arm and looked at his visitor – his conqueror. He blinked. The halo that had surrounded the kandisa had disappeared. Dressed in a very simple white dress, she stood before him in silence. The only symbol of majesty left to him was the golden winged crown resting on his head.

But when the negus looked into her eyes, he realized that the radiation had not completely disappeared. He had simply returned to his source: the kandisa itself.

A thousand rains had passed since the last direct encounter between a kandisa and a negus; between the sun and the moon. The negus remembered

circumstances of this meeting. Then he remembered who he was. He was the Axum…

“There is blood between us,” he said, echoing the words shouted by a dark-eyed shaman long ago to his golden-eyed brother.

“There have been before. There will be more. But not at this time. Right now we have a common cause.

The kandisa's voice was low, soft; yet it seemed to fill the throne room.

"If we have a common cause, why invade Axum?"
asked the negus, in a tone as hard as the humiliation heartrending him.

"Because it was impossible to convince you by argument," cried the kandisa. The Nyumbani faces its greatest danger since the arrival of the Mizungu.

"It was a long time ago, and we only made common cause because we had no choice, as if it was he himself and not his distant ancestor who had turned against the Cushites just after the victory against the Atlanteans. On the other hand, there are no more Mizungu in Nyumbani.

“No, but there are Erriten.

The negus gave him a surprised look.

"Erriten?" They hide in their city, in the lands of the Borders.
They have neither commerce nor allies. What can they do to us?

“Destroy us.

The negus' hands opened and closed as if he wanted to
pick up a weapon and throw it at the kandisa.

- You lie ! You only want to put us under your thumb, like all the
other northern kingdoms. Enslave us, steal our lands...

The kandisa had kept a neutral expression on her face. She smiles.

“You don't have anything we want. We have everything you want. If we sailed south without settling our problem with you, you would swoop down the Cush like a leopard on a herd without a shepherd.

The negus knew she was telling the

truth. "Listen to me now," said the kandisa. The Erriten are a far more dangerous threat than the Mizungu. The Atlanteans were just tools, nothing more. The Erriten, they handle. And they own

now far more dangerous tools than the Mizungu ever were. Are you too stubborn to have heard nothing of the troubles plaguing the kingdoms of the east coast?

'I'm only interested in the troubles of the Cush.

“It was the Erriten who planted the seeds of this trouble, the seeds of our downfall. They pushed at Cush, it's true. And they even grew here…

"I don't allow anything involving the Mashataan in Axum!" said the negus, furious.

“What you allow and what the Erriten do is not always the same. Now... Here's what I want from you. I want your army to sail with mine to Naama. There, we will destroy the Erriten before they can destroy us. I won't leave enough soldiers behind to invade your kingdom. Nor will there be enough Axumites here to invade Cush.

"And the Punt, the Engaruku?" the negus asked, referring to the other realms bordering his own.

Axum's relations with these two countries were hardly less hostile than with that of the kandisa.

“They agreed to join us. Puntian soldiers and engaruku will sail with us when the fleets assemble in Jukua.

"The Engaruku will allow you to use its port?" asked the negus, incredulous, knowing that the Engaruku hardly welcomed foreign ships.

The kandisa did not answer him directly; she didn't see the point of it.

“We will sail as soon as the armies assemble to embark. Will you join us?

The negus did not answer. He looked away from the golden eyes of the kandisa. He didn't ask her what the consequences of a refusal would be. The ease with which his army had been defeated spoke eloquently of how easily the Cushites could raze Gondur and scatter the Axumite people. And if their common enemy was indeed the Erriten of Naama...

But the negus was the Axum. And Axum was as stubborn as the mountains between which it nestled. He sensed an opportunity—armed Axumites within swordshot of Cushite soldiers. However, he could not

keep his lips from forming the words that were his people's creed, had been through thousands of rains.

“Alamak and Atun cannot shine in the same sky.

The kandisa's eyes narrowed. Her mouth twisted into a ruthless line, as she struggled to suppress the anger that was burning inside her.

"Right now they ***must be*** shining in the same sky," she said. Or the sky will turn black forever and neither Atun nor Alamak will shine any light there. If we are defeated by the Erriten, the stars themselves will be driven from the sky.

She stopped, realizing that her words had no effect on the negus.
She understood what he had in mind: a masquerade of acceptance masking an inner design of betrayal.

"I'll show you," she said, almost in a whisper, "what's going on."
will pass if you do what you dream of.

She released a fraction of the power that throbbed within her.

The negus staggered back, arms raised to shield himself from the blinding radiation. But there was no radiance, only a pale golden light, like the morning sun. And he lives...

***He saw the dark ramparts of Naama, the capital that gave the kingdom its name, stretching to the skies of the Reach lands. He saw the Erriten, bathed in the emerald*** mchawi. ***He saw the cities on the east coast crumble into bloody ruins. He saw a cloud of darkness spreading inexorably north... a cloud of armed men and things-which-were-not-men, a cloud thicker than a thousand swarms of locusts and a thousand times more destructive. He saw the turrets of Gondur knocked down stone by stone, and the overturned stelae coming to smash in the streets. He saw his subjects dragged, screaming, to the altars to be sacrificed to the Demon-Gods. He saw the Erriten, gigantic, triumphant, dominating the whole Nyumbani. He saw the seed that the Mashataan wanted to sow to replace the children of the Cloud Striders...***

The negus found himself on his knees, rocking back and forth like he hadn't had since his wife's death, many rains before. He heard his own strangled voice saying:

"Enough... Please, enough..."

Then he felt the hands of the kandisa gently helping him up. The light had disappeared. The kandisa looked at him and his face bore neither

pride or triumph. She only felt regret that she had to diminish her strength to convince a stubborn man.

"Will you join us?" she asked again.

"Yes," replied the negus.

He had quickly regained control of himself; his gaze and his voice were firm.

"Thank you," said the kandisa. Now let's discuss transporting your soldiers to Jukua…

After the kandisa left the throne room, the negus stayed behind. He knew he would soon receive a visit from a member of the calmer Hakut Ras. The nobles would no longer wield the blades with which they had intended to cut him down. The kandisa had spoken to them too.

She had left in him a little of her own power, a little of her will. He was no longer the same man. The words of the dark-eyed shaman, long dead, no longer echoed endlessly in his head.

Suddenly his eyes noticed movement at the periphery of his field of vision. He turned to his broken throne. Something crawled out from under the stones.

Fear closed its icy fingers on his spine as he leaned down to take a closer look at the thing watching him. It was a spider – a large, hairy creature, its legs stretching farther than the span of the negus' fingers. But it was not a natural spider. His hair was emerald, and his eyes human, and the faint trill in his voice.

"What is most important to you, O Negus Negusti?"
Honor or revenge?

Before the wide-eyed Axumite can react, the spider disappeared in a cloud of green smoke dissipated by an invisible wind.

## 10.
## MEETING

Dusk was falling on the hills east of Kitwana. The silhouette of these hills loomed against the glowing sky like the rounded backs of a herd of elephants, forming a natural barrier between Kitwana and the western regions known as Maguvurunde. Sterile, unsuitable for crops or livestock, this hilly landscape was called ***bure,*** land without fruit. It was in the ***bure*** that Majnun and his followers had sought refuge.

The loyalists who encamped here numbered less than a hundred – desperate remnants of the soldiers, palace guards, nobles, merchants and craftsmen over whom Majnun had ruled. Among them were only six women.

The Naama had struck so quickly, so suddenly, that only the hastiest evacuation could have been effected. Majnun himself had lost his queen and children during the carnage. None of the loyalists who followed him had escaped similar losses. In their flight from the capture of Mlongo, luck had played a more important role than skill.

Sitting in front of a makeshift shelter, lost in a recess between two hills, Majnun looked very little like the monarch he had been a few days earlier. He was a thin, ebony-skinned man who had seen more than thirty rains flow. Her face, once very beautiful, almost feminine, was marked with lines hollowed out by fatigue and grief. He only wore a ***suruali*** and a turban that doubled as a bandage for a head wound. Other wounds marked his vigorous torso.

Only his eyes revealed that he was no mere fugitive. There was a deep resolve in those eyes. A resolve and a bit of the recklessness that had been his main characteristic before he inherited his father's throne. It was the return of that temerity that had enabled him to avoid the clutches of the Erriten.

***For what good it was, he*** thought sadly. ***I'm sitting here in these barren hills and I don't even have enough fighters to mount a proper revolt. But even if they were a thousand times more numerous, that wouldn't be enough against…***

Majnun cursed the course of his thoughts. He didn't want to remember the image of the monstrosities fighting near the human soldiers of the Naama army. Accompanied by Useni, his most trusted adviser, he watched the sun sink behind the hills. Another day was dying.

Then Majnun and Useni heard the piped trill of a hornbill.

There were no hornbills in the ***bure.***

As the camp sentries raised their weapons and the other loyalists went on alert, Majnun and Useni exchanged a knowing look. There remained loyalists – few in number – who had not joined in the flight to the ***bure.*** These had remained in Mlongo and the other towns to observe the progress of the Naama conquest and – if possible – to resist it.

The existence of these observers had been concealed from the people in the camp. Majnun and Useni had agreed to think it unwise to give the loyalists a hope that was very likely to be unfounded. If developments could be advantageous to the cause, the observers had been instructed to search the encampment and bring their information to the exiled king. Majnun himself had fixed the signal: the trill of a hornbill.

- Already? murmured the king to Useni.

Majnun walked quickly to the edge of the camp. The shadows of the hills darkened. Useni followed his king close behind. Even in the face of the worst calamities, the counselor continued to observe protocol. Fidelity to customs was the anchor of his reason.

Looking nervous and menacing, the two sentries guarding the entrance to the encampment challenged the invisible intruder to show himself. Before they could go any further, Useni and Majnun arrived.

"Lower your spears," said the king. The hornbill trill is a signal intended for my ears only. Whoever is here is not an enemy.

As the sentries complied, Majnun cupped his hands over his mouth and gave a similar cry. Four silhouettes

emerged from the shadows, coming from a hiding place surprisingly close to the camp. Majnun and the sentries murmured in admiration at the silence of their visitors. But Useni's brow furrowed with concern.

***Can we be approached so easily?*** he wondered. The visitors approached again; their silhouettes were only dimly illuminated by the twilight. Two were of medium height; another appeared to be a child; a giant towered over them all.

One of the medium-sized men led the others.

As the features of the individual became discernible in the half darkness, the first sentinel recognized him and uttered a little cry.

"Chukumba," he cried in disbelief. I thought you were dead.

"You had to believe it," the Kitwanian retorted. It was the will of our king.

Chukumba was a slender man with an austere face, whose dark clothes blended in well with the surrounding darkness. Like Majnun and Useni, he had a frank and direct gaze.

“Chukumba,” Majnun said in welcome.

The king was not as enthusiastic as the sentry about the man's arrival.

“You and everyone who stayed in the city should stay there until you hear from me or until you find something that can help us against the Naama. I didn't send for you. So I guess you come here for the second reason: maybe it has something to do with your three companions?

Useni was amazed at Majnun's cold tone. Then he realized that the coming of Chukumba meant the end of the king's uncertain exile in the ***bure.*** Whatever news the loyalist brings, whatever the importance of the three strangers, Majnun should act. And Useni knew his king was not prepared for this…

“My companions can speak for themselves,” Chukumba said, motioning them forward.

The smallest of them preceded the others.

"My prince," said Pomphis, smiling. Do you remember the taste of palm wine from Zahra Zuwena?

The monarch blinked, shook his head, and stared at the smiling pygmy. Then his face lit up with a broad smile, his first since the fall of Mlongo.

" ***Mavidogo !"*** Majnun happily exclaimed, rushing towards the Bambuti and lifting him into a friendly embrace.

Pomphis' smile froze as he too hugged Majnun. He himself had forgotten that his name hadn't always been Pomphis. He had acquired it only when he went to Cush as a protege of the scholar Khabatekh.

The name given to him by his parents when he was born in Ituri Kubwa had long slipped from his memory, but during his years as a ***mjimja*** he was known by the nickname of Mavidogo, which in Kiswa means "little shit". ".

Everyone in the camp understood Kiswa because it was the common language in the kingdoms on the east coast. When the ancient name of Pomphis sounded, the entire camp erupted in laughter—perhaps more than the occasion called for, from the pygmy's perspective.
But the loyalists had for too long borne the burden of despair.
The name, added to the small size of Pomphis, allowed the Kitwanians to forget a little the fear which gripped them in its oppressive vice...

When the laughter stopped, Majnun stepped back and watched Pomphis with genuine pleasure.

"I never thought I'd see you again, Mavidogo," he said. Especially here.
How are you…

"My prince," Pomphis interrupted him, speaking loud enough to be heard above another burst of laughter that greeted his old nickname. Or, should I say, my king. I'll tell you how my friends and I got to you last night in detail. But first I must inform you that many rains have passed since I was... employed by the sha'a. I am Cushite now, and I have a new name: Pomphis. Please do me the honor of giving it to me as I give you your new title.

Joy faded from Majnun's face. He stared intently at the Bambuti, sizing it up rather than relying on mere memories. The silence created an atmosphere of unease long before he spoke again.

"The rains changed us both, Mavid… Pomphis. I am no longer the third irresponsible son you knew at Mavindi. And you…
You may have changed even more than me. I remember now hearing that you had fallen out of favor with the sha'a, that you had narrowly escaped Azania. But it was only a rumor, came to the South by

merchant ships. I often thought of you, during all these rains...
But now, amazing as it is, you are here! Tell me, Ma...
Pomphis, why did you come to the ***bure*** and who are your two friends?

Rabir and Imaro joined Pomphis. Even in the semi-darkness of impending night, the two men were clearly different from the Kitwanians.

Rabir showed up before Pomphis had time to launch into a long and convoluted introduction.

“I am Rabir of Zanj. We never met, ***ngwana,*** but my ***jahazi*** anchored at Mlongo from time to time, the captain said, giving Majnun a common title of respect in the east coast kingdoms.

Majnun nodded.

“No, we've never met, Rabir, but I've heard of you. Your ship is the famous ***Epesi Nyuni.***

"Not anymore," said Rabir, a little brusquely.

The bitterness in the Zanjian's tone hit Majnun. Yet despite this reaction and Rabir's reputation, the king's attention was drawn to Pomphis' other companion: the giant beside whom even the sturdy sentries seemed small. Just like Pomphis and Rabir, Imaro wore a broad-tailed ***suruali*** and ***shati ,*** which could not hide his powerful figure.

"And you, my silent friend?" asked Majnun.

Imaro hesitated before speaking, and when he did, he chose his words with more attention than usual.

“Someone stole my name. Before I tell you this, I want you make it clear that I did not commit the acts performed by the thief.

Majnun gave the warrior a surprised look.

“You are a friend of Mavi… of Pomphis, and I owe her my life. If you are his friend, you are welcome here, whatever your name is.

— My name is Imaro.

There was no reaction. Bomunu had not continued his masquerade in Kitwana. Imaro let himself be carried away by the relief. He chose not to reveal his other name, N'tu-nje, however, a name he now wished he could forget.

Then Pomphis began to tell the story of the displacement of the ***chephet,*** beginning with his first encounter with Imaro in the City of

madness. Before the Bambuti had finished, the faint glow of dusk disappeared and the camp was bathed in night. Two fires were burning brightly near the loyalist shelters. They had long ceased to worry about being discovered in the ***bure.*** Until that night, some had even stopped worrying about seeing the next sunrise.

The light of the fires reflected on the dark and serious faces of those who listened to Pomphis. Like most of his followers, Majnun was drawn to the Bambuti's storytelling skills, recounting the path of tragedy and terror he and Imaro had traversed thus far. The only face expressing doubts was Useni's.

This was an old man, Majnun's father's childhood friend. Its many rains had chased the black from his hair and the flesh from his cadaverous silhouette. The tension felt during the Naama attack and the long flight to the ***homespun*** almost killed him, but he hid his pain from Majnun.

Useni knew how to listen. For this he had become Majnun's most influential adviser, as he had been Al-Imamu's. He was also a born skeptic, a trait that sometimes increased the value of his advice. As he absorbed Pomphis' words, the lines of his forehead creased in disbelief. When the pygmy paused to catch his breath after describing the trip to Kitwana in Sefu's boat, Useni voiced his doubts.

"Are we to believe that you entered our realm undetected by the Naama?" They infest Mlongo like flies on carrion. Are we to believe that you weren't seen... or followed?

Majnun understood where the old man was going with his questions, but the tone used seriously annoyed him.

“Useni…” he began.

“He's right to be suspicious, ***ngwana,”*** Rabir said. In his place I would be too.

Majnun nodded and waited for the Zanjian to continue.

"But we didn't openly come to your country," Rabir went on. We came at night, landing in a cove that only a few sailors know. We watched, waited, until we heard of a man who knew something about Loyalists.

The man led us to another individual, who led us to Chukumba.

Chukumba led us here. Would he have done it if he had harbored doubts about us?

Then Rabir gave Useni a hard look.

“A man you trust, Chukumba, believed us. Why not you ?

"What would you do in my place?" Useni countered, sending Rabir his own words back.

— Useni, enough! Majnun snapped. Even after all these rains, Pomphis is my friend. I place the same trust in him as I do in you. His story sounds really amazing. But would you have believed what happened to Mlongo if you hadn't seen him? (Majnun caught his breath before continuing:) What Pomphis says seems to outline a plan of which the invasion of our country is only a part. The Naama must seek to dominate the entire east coast before the Cushites can prevent it. Pomphis, do you know what the kandisa intends to do?

Before the Bambuti could respond, Useni intervened.

“If there's a plan to all this, its focal point is sitting here,” he said, pointing to Imaro. You haven't said anything yet. What do you intend to do here? Do you want to involve us in your hunt for this "Bohu"? And how do you know you weren't followed?

“Useni…” warned Majnun again.

Imaro stood up. All eyes were drawn to him like pieces of iron to a magnet. The light of the fires spattered him like blood on the battlefield. Useni felt fear touch him as the warrior looked down at him.

'Don't worry about those who follow me,' he said. The one I'm tracking is far more dangerous.

"Yes, this Bohu who may or may not exist," Useni scoffed, struggling not to let fear peek into his voice. Majnun, is there any proof that this Bohu took part in the capture of Mlongo?

- No, admit Majnun.

'But I heard something.

The voice that rose behind the circle of listeners belonged to one of the few women in the camp. It was Jemile, the wife of a merchant whose family had perished during the initial Naama assault.

“Tell us what you know, Jemile,” Majnun urged her gently as she moved toward the center of the circle.

“Before we left town, I heard a story about a black ship coming into port during the night,” she said, letting little emotion show on her worn face. It was propelled neither by the wind nor by oars. A man descended from it and the Naama bowed down to him as if he were king, or if they were afraid of him. The boat sailed south without him.

— To God, dit Imaro.
- How do you know ? Useni asked defiantly.

“He passed by here.

- How do you know ? repeated Useni, as unease swept through the loyalists like the wind sweeping the waters.

Imaro rolled up the sleeves of his ***shati,*** revealing the bracelets of the kandisa. These trapped the light of the fires and absorbed it to turn it into a gold and crimson glow. The loyalists fell back, surprised; not just by the light bands but also by the brute force emanating from the man himself. Even Useni was impressed.

When Imaro rolled up his sleeves, the intensity of the moment faded. Pomphis had already spoken of the bracelets given by the kandisa. Seeing them had erased the disbelief that might have lingered in the minds of most loyalists.

"That's how I know," Imaro said. Bohu's trail isn't recent, but I know he's been here.

- Where did he go ? Majnun asked, almost in a whisper.

“Beyond the hills,” Imaro said, reaching west.

The Kitwanians exchanged apprehensive glances. They knew little of Maguvurunde… Kingdoms perpetually at war, and soldiers surging from stone fortresses built on high plateaus.

Maguvurunde was isolated from the coastal kingdoms by the inhospitable ***bure*** and from the Bahari Mashiriki by the abrupt cut of a defile, preventing any access to a port. Now and again, once in the rain, an adventurous merchant from one side of the ***bure*** would bring news of the day's triumphs and tragedies. In Maguvurunde, the news was still dominated by bloodshed.

"And you intend to follow him?" said Majnun.

“Yes, until he's dead, or me.

Silence fell between the king and the warrior.

“Majnun, my friend,” Pomphis said, breaking the silence as well as the protocol. You've been stuck here for weeks now. What are you going to do ?

- Do ? Majnun repeated sadly. If you knew how many times I asked the question, Mavidogo!

No one burst out laughing at the ancient name of Pomphis, nor did the latter corrected Majnun.

— At first we thought we would stay here until we could consolidate our forces in order to retake Mlongo. It didn't take long for us to realize that we were mentioning ourselves. Have you seen what plagues the streets of Mlongo now, Mavidogo? Have you seen him ?

“No, my king. We did not enter the city. But we have heard of the Inhuman allies marching alongside the Naama…

"But you didn't see them," Majnun said, raising his voice. Your warrior might not speak so bravely if he had to face the ***irimu...*** the lion-demons. Or the ***unthlatu…*** the walking-serpents. Or, worst of all, the ***izingogo :*** creatures that walk on all fours, like baboons, but have human faces! These are the things that have driven most of the fighting for the Naama. They were tearing, slashing, killing, and nothing could be done!

Overwhelmed by the memory of the horrors, Majnun was unable to continue. Useni spoke for himself and for all the others.

- We are waiting. We are waiting for our supplies to run out and we are starving. Or else the Naama will seek us out and kill us. Anyway, we are waiting for death.

"Wait for death and it will take you," Imaro said. Fight it! She may retreat for a while.

There was no irony or condemnation in his voice as he repeated a saying often heard among the Ilyassai. But Majnun looked up at him with new ardour.

"You say you're going to Maguvurunde, warrior?" So I come with you. Me and anyone here who wants to join us. The choice is theirs. I no longer speak as a king.

Useni's mouth opened in shock, like those of several other loyalists.

“Majnun… Are you leaving Kitwana? Useni asked in a trembling voice.

“No, but alone we cannot save Kitwana. Nor can we wait for the Cushites to come to our rescue. We need another help. That of Maguvurunde.

- But it's madness! exclaimed Useni. These people only care about killing each other. Why would they care what happens to us?

“What happened in Kitwana could happen to them too. If it helps us to drive the Naama back into Bahari, Maguvurunde will help itself.

***Exactly,*** thought Pomphis. He said nothing, happy to allow Majnun to speak for him.

"I am accompanying Pomphis and his friends, Useni," said the king. (Then, turning to the rest of his followers, he added,) You are free to stay here or travel west with me. I'm not giving you orders. The choice is yours. Where would you go ?

"In Maguvurunde with our king!" cried the loyalists, almost as one man.

The ***homespun*** resounds with their renewed courage and reaffirmed loyalty.

"So it's decided," Useni muttered, turning to Majnun when the shouting had stopped. I am with you, as I was with Al-Imamu before you. But I'm still not sure our visitors weren't tracked.

"Useni," Majnun sneered. My father always said you were pessimistic since the day you were born. But those who doubt have their use…

Majnun stopped speaking when Imaro stiffened abruptly, looked at his bracelets and growled something in a language the Kitwanians did not understand.

Then a sentry's howl of agony confirmed the dark Useni's presentiments.

## INTERLUDE

***Far from the Kitwanian encampment, a little girl sat in front of a pool of placid waters. His gaze plunged into the depths of the calm waters. The surface reflected the image of the moon, stars and his face. But the little girl, whose name was Nongkwaze, saw more than just reflections.***

***Nongkwaze had seen only nine rains pass. His bare chest was still flat, his hips as narrow as a boy's.***
***Normally, a girl her age should have learned how to prepare a meal, take care of the children and give pleasure to the man she would marry when she had completed the puberty rites of her people, tl***

***But Nongkwaze was different, filled with*** unkansi: ***the power of trance, the power of prophecy. When she spoke of her first visions, seen in the Wankuza pool, the Tsubi listened to her and acted, as they were convinced that these visions reflected the truth. Because of what Nongkwaze had seen in the basin, the drums of war resounded throughout the Abamba Highlands, lying north of Naama and south of Maguvurunde.***

***Leaning closer to the water, Nongkwaze heard the thundering drums and ecstatic chanting of the Tsubi. She relegated these noises to the back of her mind, for the pool shone with an internal light and the visions came...***

She saw cattle slaughtered by thousands of heads and the pool darkened with their blood and in her head she heard the moos of betrayal and suffering...

She saw fields of millet burning and the flames rose, brighter than the sun, and smoke filled the sky...

She saw emaciated men, women and children working like ants to dig pits larger than entire villages...

She saw the sky split like a broken peanut, the light streaming in torrents from that crevasse, and the titanic figures of the gods emerging from the light, each leading a herd of cattle the size of elephants...

She saw the gods pour an inexhaustible supply of grain into the pits dug by hungry people...

She saw all the tribes of the Abamba Highlands fall to the spears of the Tsubi, who had eaten the grain and cattle of the gods, becoming godlike themselves...

She saw all these things simultaneously, each vision coming superimpose on the previous one…

***Then the visions were chased away, leaving only a flat black shadow floating on the surface... a shadow that reflected neither the moon nor the stars. She spoke to Nongkwaze, hooking her words on the little girl's tongue so she could repeat them to her people.***

***When the shadow message was completed, the darkness disappeared and*** the unkansi ***was broken. For a moment Nongkwaze was a frightened, disoriented child, caught in the grip of a power she could not understand. Then the shadow's words swelled on her tongue and she knew she had to repeat them before they slid down her throat to choke her. She rushed down the hill to tell her people that the time had come for them to fulfill the destiny for which the gods had chosen him above all others. That night would begin the destruction of livestock and fields.***

***In the Wankuza basin, a laugh rose above the surface.***
***Bohu's laughter...***

## 11.
## THE BEAST MEN

The ***izingogo*** had followed like their shadows Imaro and his companions from the suburbs of Mlongo to the ***bure ;*** they moved briskly, silently, hiding behind rocks, trees or bushes of tall grass. Combining human cunning with animal senses, they had avoided detection, even by Imaro. As the travelers made their way to the loyalist encampment, the creatures had gathered in the hills like an oil spill. They waited until they were sure the time to attack had come.

They overcame the sentries in one concerted charge. Then they were among the Kitwanians who staggered in fear upon seeing them.

For as Majnun had said, the ***izingogo*** were human quadrupeds. Their size approached that of an adult but the proportions of their limbs were different. Their arms were longer, ending in large spatulated hands. Their legs, articulated like those of a hare, propelled them in leaps of terrifying rapidity. Their backs were curved like an arc and their bodies, as thin as a cheetah's, were covered with short curly hairs.

But the scariest feature of the ***izingogo*** was their face. Apart from a slight prominence of the jaws, he was fully human. But when they opened their mouths, the ***izingogo*** revealed carnivore teeth. Those teeth and the strength contained in their outstretched hands were the only weapons they needed, besides their numbers...

An endless stream of humanoid creatures swept over the encampment and began to pounce on the panicking Loyalists. A concert of pain and anguish arose to welcome the first light of the stars. Almost half of the men present in the camp

fell under the first wave of the onslaught of the ***izingogo.*** Those left standing took out their weapons and began to fight.

"I ***knew*** they were being followed!"

That was all Useni had time to shout before an ***izingogo*** ripped his throat open to scarlet ruin. Other monsters swooped down on Majnun and the loyalists around him. Some creatures fell, pierced by swords and spears. Others managed to grab limbs and throats between their teeth.

Pomphis rolled on the ground in front of one of them. He relentlessly struck the beastman's ribcage with his dagger, but ***the izingogo*** didn't let out a sound. His teeth approached the Bambuti's throat.

***Imaro, where are you?*** Pomphis thought desperately as his opponent's hand gripped his sword arm. Then the pygmy heard the sound of a dull impact and the beast rolled away from him.

Moving faster than he had ever done, he spun around and plunged his dagger into ***the izingogo's palace.*** The tip penetrated the brain and the monster died without a sound.

Getting to his feet, Pomphis opened his mouth to thank Imaro for having him. once again saved. It was Rabir who was in front of him.

"Where's Imaro?" asked the Bambuti curtly before adding, taken remorse: thank you for having me…

"Forget it," Rabir cut him off. If we want to survive this, we have to manage to organize these people. Imaro tries to take them to a place where they will be somewhat protected.

Two ***izingogo*** rushed towards the travellers. Rabir struck one with his scimitar, splitting his skull. Pomphis managed to avoid the other. Before the beastman could turn to attack, the Bambuti plunged his dagger through his spine, up to the hilt. Then he leapt back, pulling his blade out of ***the izingogo's flesh.*** Black blood spurts out under the starlight.

"Here's Imaro," Rabir said, pointing his scimitar to the center of the encampment.

In the dim light of stars and campfires, Pomphis made out the unmistakable form of the Ilyassai that struck, tore the ***izingogo.***

"We'd better join him," Pomphis said.

- Why ? He doesn't need our help.

- No ... It is we who need his! cried Pomphis, while that three new ***izingogo*** leaped towards him.

Imaro's arm rose and fell tirelessly, carving a bloody furrow through the ranks of the ***izingogo.*** As quick as the beastmen were, Imaro's blade was even quicker. Before one of the creatures collapsed, it planted itself in the body of another. A pile of hairy carcasses was piling up at the warrior's feet.

The urge to kill sings in his veins. From the tingle of his bracelets, he knew the ***izingogo*** were Mashataan creations.
They might have been sent by Bohu or by the Erriten who had taken Mlongo. Imaro didn't care where the monsters came from; he only knew one thing: now he had a tangible target on which to exert his hatred.

But he didn't fight with blind fury. He was fighting to protect Majnun and the other loyalists. His solitary counterattack had given the survivors enough time to collect their wits and their weapons, to organize their defense. Now the Kitwanians were gathering around the Ilyassai.

The ***izingogo were*** still slaying lone fighters, but those who had gathered around Imaro were beginning to stem the flow of Beastmen. However, these were always much more numerous than their adversaries. Soon the armed arms would tire, the javelins would grow dull. And the ***izingogo*** would prevail, whatever it cost them…

Imaro scanned the dark battlefield, searching for Rabir and Pomphis. He had separated from them in the mad first moments of the attack and had seen little of the fighting going on elsewhere, for the Beastmen had surrounded him like a pack of Tamburure wild dogs. . He had seen packs like this kill an adult zebra before. But a zebra was not an Ilyassai.

Finally he saw his companions. The Bambuti and the Zanjian were part of a group of men fighting to join him. The ***izingogo*** attacked with a fury beyond mere bestial madness, but the desperation of the humans gave them the strength to repel them.

Suddenly a new wave ***of izingogo swept*** over the group of Rabir and Pomphis. Imaro quickly realized that the men would be slaughtered before they could reach him.

Without glancing back, he crossed the heap of corpses at his feet and threw himself among the ***izingogo.*** It struck them like a storm; his roaring war cries were thunder, his flaming sword lightning that gave death whenever it touched a monster.

The Beastmen scattered. They had learned to fear the warrior with the tireless arm and the bracelets that gleamed faintly under the stars.

But their retirement was only temporary. Something deeper than their own wild instinct drove them forward. During the respite granted by Imaro, his friends and the others managed to join the main group of Kitwanians. The ***izingogo*** did not pursue them.

The survivors stared intently at the scene of the massacre. Bodies littered the ground like leaves after a tornado. Many of the motionless forms belonged to ***izingogo,*** but far too many were human. Fewer than sixty loyalists remained standing; among them was Jemile. Very few of the survivors were uninjured.

They were overwhelmed with fatigue and resignation. Despite the courage with which they had fought, they knew that there were far too many ***izingogo left*** assembling for the final assault.

Majnun looked at Pomphis.

"You brought us death," he said sadly.

- Nope ! shouted another voice. He ***is*** the one who brought us death!

The speaker was a Kitwanian with a torn scalp; his face was a grotesque bloody picture. With his scarlet sword he pointed to Imaro.

Whispers began to arise – whispers Imaro knew well. He had heard them on ***the Epesi Nyuni*** after the undead attacked. He felt the eyes of the Kitwanians land on him, felt the weight of their accusations weigh on his shoulders.

A thought burst the surface of his mind, a thought that had been inside him since his days with the Ilyassai.

***Should I continue to prove myself?***

He knew the answer.

***Yes.***

He turned to face Majnun.

"Is there a way out of these hills, beyond your shelters?" he asked.

- Go out ? Majnun asked, looking at him blankly. What do you mean you say "out"? Where can we go? We are already dead.

Imaro told him what he had in mind. The Kitwanian's eyes widened as he spoke. Rabir nodded, while Pomphis shook his head in dismay. The loyalists within earshot just stared in disbelief at Imaro.

"There's a way out," Majnun said finally. A ravine located west of the shelters. It would lead to the border between ***Bure*** and Maguvurunde. If your plan works, maybe we can escape the ***izingogo.*** Otherwise…

“You'll have a better chance than staying here. Now tell me how to get to the other side of this ravine.

Majnun gave him rough directions. He wondered how the Ilyassai hoped to remember landmarks he had never seen before, especially in the dark. He didn't know Imaro yet.

The warrior nodded then turned to Rabir and Pomphis.

"Don't do this, Imaro," the Bambuti implored. You will be killed before you have had the chance to face Bohu. Tanisha and Kilewo will not be avenged and the ***chephet*** will remain unbalanced.

“I bring death,” Imaro said, staring at the Kitwanian who had pointed his sword at him.

He looked away, ashamed without understanding why.

“Imaro, no! Pomphis shouted as the Ilyassai turned.

Imaro didn't look back, took a fighting stance.

"They'll be back soon," he said. Go or stay! The choice is yours.

The dark swarm was indeed beginning to move. This time there was no furious, headlong charge. The ***izingogo*** moved slowly, like waterlogged clouds crossing the sky. But the Kitwanians were still hesitant.

"Let's go," said Rabir. Imaro can take care of himself and he gives us our only chance.

Listening to the Zanjian, the Kitwanians began to run in the direction from their shelters.

Pomphis stood back for a moment, gazing thoughtfully at the silhouette of his enigmatic friend.

***I'm afraid I won't see you again, Imaro, he*** thought sadly. ***Do what you said you would do, please. Don't fight yourself. you would lose***

***the battle…***

Aware of the need to act quickly, Pomphis could not help but look over his shoulder at Imaro. The warrior was still motionless, facing the approaching ***izingogo .*** A little bile rose in Pomphis' throat as he ran.

***Now, Imaro,*** silently implored the Bambuti. ***For love d'Aspelta, do it now!***

Suddenly the battle cry of the Ilyassai shattered the disturbing tranquility of the approaching ***izingogo.*** For a moment the Beastmen stopped moving, bewildered. Then a large number broke away from the main group and rushed in pursuit of Imaro, who was running away from both Kitwanians and ***izingogo.*** In a few moments, he disappeared into the darkness of the ***homespun***

The rest of the beastmen charged at the fleeing loyalists. Their slow, thoughtful walk had disappeared. The urge to kill flashed madly in their eyes as they surged forward.

But the Kitwanians had already taken firebrands from the campfires. Some cried out in pain as they felt tongues of flame burning their flesh but they didn't let go. Torches in hand, the loyalists ran to their makeshift homes. Passing near the pile of windbreaks, they threw their burning brands into it.

The tents caught fire immediately. Wood, thatch and fabrics gave rise to a wall of fire that rose to the sky, separating the Kitwanians from the ***izingogo.***

Finally finding their voices, the beastmen growled and squealed in frustration. These voices were high-pitched, shrill… but human. The sounds coming out of their throats formed words, even though none of the east coasters had ever spoken such a language. For a few more moments, the ***izingogo*** howled and gesticulated at the flames their race had never mastered. Then they jumped back, following the direction taken by those who were pursuing Imaro.

On the other side of the blaze, the Kitwanians were running in a ravine separating two hills. This was a fissure of darkness within the earth; starlight penetrated only weakly into its depths. Stumbling, falling, getting up and stumbling again, the loyalists hurried furiously through the darkness. They expected at any moment to see hordes ***of izingogo swooping*** down on them from the slopes

which rose like ebony walls from the sides. But no ***izingogo*** did not show up.

Imaro was not mistaken. He was the Beastmen's mission to kill. The flaming dugouts preventing the pursuit of the Kitwanians, the ***izingogo*** could only give chase to the Ilyassai within the ***bure.*** And despite the recent battle that had decimated them, there were still too many of them for Imaro to face alone. If they caught up to him in the hills...

***Don't let them, Imaro, Pomphis*** thought, struggling to keep up with men with longer legs than his own. The only sounds echoing in the ravine were the clatter of boots and sandals on stone and the heavy breathing of lungs battling exhaustion.

***Don't fight them, Imaro,*** implored Pomphis, wishing his thoughts could somehow reach his friend. ***Just run!***

Dawn was creeping across the sky as the Kitwanians stopped fleeing. Fatigue descended upon them; they had not paused in their running. As they rested amid the low mounds that marked the end of the ***bure,*** the fugitives were animated with nervous movements. They kept looking over their shoulders, listening for the slightest sound coming from the ravine. But the ***izingogo*** did not come.

Ni Imaro…

Away from the others, a small group of men were holding a council. Majnun, Rabir, Pomphis and Chukumba leaned against the yellow rocky side of the hills. Before them lay the Maguvurunde, a gently rolling land where wide plains alternated with thick forests. From the ***bure,*** the Maguvurunde seemed uninhabited. Yet the exiles knew the kingdoms that often turned this verdant land crimson with their quarrels.

“We can't wait much longer, Pomphis,” Majnun said.

Obviously, your friend is dead. A strange man... He sacrificed himself for us as we blamed him for attracting the ***izingogo.***

Chukumba frowned, as he knew Majnun was referring to him.

"Imaro is not dead," Pomphis said.

- Impossible. No one could have survived against such an amount of these monsters.

- You do not know him.

- Nope. I wish I had known him better, said Majnun. Either way, we can't wait. Nothing can be useful to us in the ***bure ;*** everything awaits us in the Maguvurunde. We must contact the local kingdoms, warn them of what the Naama have done and warn them of the arrival of this Bohu that your friend was chasing.

Pomphis remained silent. But his stubborn expression did not leave him. Sighing in exasperation, Majnun turned to Chukumba.

"You said you know the language of Maguvurunde?"

“Yes, I learned it from a merchant from Amanyani, one of the kingdoms here. It looks like kiswa. It is not very difficult to learn.

"What else did you learn about these countries?"

' You know, ***ngwana,*** it's been several rains since I spoke to this merchant. Things may have changed here since then. I can only tell you what he told me. At this time a new war was brewing, the Amanyani facing the alliance of its rival kingdoms, the Inyanga and the Mapungubwe.

The Amanyani had a new ***monomatapa,*** a new king. This one was apparently Abamba, a barbarian from the Highlands, south of Maguvurunde. Allied with the Abamba tribes, he seemed to want to conquer the other two kingdoms to bring all of Maguvurunde under his rule. But I don't know if he succeeded.

"He succeeded," said Pomphis.

- How do you know ? Chukumba asked.

“Few things happening at the Nyumbani escape the gaze of the kandisa,” the Bambuti replied calmly.

— If this monomatapa really dominates the whole region, he will make an ally priceless, dit Majnun.

"Yes, if we can convince him that he needs us," Rabir said.

"When he hears Imaro's story, he will be convinced," Pomphis said.

“But I'm afraid he'll never hear it,” Majnun said. I'm sorry, Pomphis, but we can't wait until noon to leave. We can't stay any longer. I owe this to my people, for the losses they have suffered defending my cause. I… owe it to Useni.

"I understand," said Pomphis. If Imaro hasn't arrived when you leave, I'll wait for him here. You can go on without me.

“Mavidogo…” began Majnun.

He was interrupted by a shout from one of the Kitwanians watching the ravine.

Everyone turned to this man. He did not designate the ravine but a hill rising above those which gave refuge to the fugitives. There, the rays of the rising sun outlined a colossal figure bearing a stripped blade. A light morning breeze fluttered her tattered clothes.

Imaro started down the hill. As he approached, the growing light revealed the blood that sprayed him scarlet from head to toe. He looked like a god of war descending from a celestial battlefield.

Despite the risks the Ilyassai had taken for them, the Kitwanians were not entirely happy to see him again. ***Who is he ? How could a simple human have survived the*** izingogo ?

Most asked themselves this question. And their answers were disturbing.

"I keep saying this one brings death," said the Kitwanian, who had aimed his bloody blade at Imaro, as he emerged from the first ***izingogo assault.***

Rabir and the others had joined the bulk of the fugitives. The captain heard the Kitwanian's comment.

"You are wrong, my friend," he said.

- What do you mean ?

“He brings life. But it is the price of this life that is death.

## 12.
# OR GROUPS

Kumbura was the eastern outpost of the Kingdom of Mapungubwe. It consisted of a village and a fortress in which the troops guarding the border were garrisoned. For these soldiers, the surveillance of the extreme east of the kingdom was a real sinecure. Beyond the plains and rows of leafless trees that surrounded the village were only the deserted hills protecting Kitwana – a land that existed only in the minds of most Maguvurunde people.
Only merchants and adventurers crossed the hills, and the soldiers cared neither for the fortress was a relic of the old wars, and the duties of the soldiers were matters of ritual ceremonies more than anything else.

So it was not the border guard who first saw the group of ragged fugitives who ventured into Maguvurunde.

Sithole and Mdlalo herded Kumbura's herd of cattle near a ***sharangwa grove.*** The ***sharangwa*** were distinguished by bare branches that twisted skyward like the fingers of a giant with arthritis. They were said to serve as a refuge for spirits; how could trees on which no leaves grew otherwise continue to grow, rain after rain?

The presence of the spirits in the trees meant little to Sithole and Mdlalo. Each rain, we attracted their good graces by rites that became more joyful than solemn. The two herdsmen were boys of twelve rains. Sithole was tall and skinny; his front teeth were prominent. His companion was shorter, stockier.
Both wore only simple loincloths and conical straw hats. As weapons they had broad-bladed knives and long sticks.

The cattle the boys herded were of a breed found only in Maguvurunde: stubborn animals with russet coats, whose slender legs, narrow muzzles and spiraling horns betrayed antelope ancestors. Despite their wild heritage, the cattle – called m'paa – were so docile that keeping them took little effort. Predators were rare; even more thieves.

Sithole and Mdlalo therefore paid little attention to the ***sharangwa*** and the cattle grazing peacefully in the thick grass. The two boys were playing fight with their sticks. The sound of wood banging on wood and boyish laughter rose up into a cloudless, carefree sky.

Sithole used his size advantage to fool his opponent's guard. The end of his staff hit the head of the smaller one with more force than Sithole had intended. Mdlalo staggered, dropped his weapon, and fell headlong to the ground.

Horrified, Sithole leaned down beside his friend.

- Mdlalo! he cried, appalled. How are you ? I did not want…

Suddenly Mdlalo turned, half rising, and threw Sithole to the ground.
His greater strength allowed him to immobilize the other boy without difficulty. As they struggled in the grass, they both roared with laughter.

It was then that the ***m'paa*** began to show signs of tension. They trampled the ground and uttered high-pitched complaints, unlike the lowing of cattle in any other region of Nyumbani.

At first, the boys were too engrossed in their struggle to notice their animals' nervousness. It was only when the complaint grew too loud to ignore that Mdlalo and Sithole looked towards the ***sharangwa*** that stretched like a barrier of forked stakes to the side of the pasture.

Their eyes widened in shock as they saw spirits emerging from the spirit trees.

Quickly getting to their feet, the two boys did not take their eyes off the apparitions crossing the grass to approach them.
Sithole reached for his staff; Mdlalo seizes the hilt of his knife.
Both trembled with terror; the intruders appearing in the shaded spaces between the ***sharangwa*** seemed innumerable. Behind the frightened boys, the ***m'paa*** were animated with nervous movement.

- What is that ? Mdlalo whispered to his friend.

'I don't know,' Sithole replied in the same tone, 'but they outnumber us.

As the intruders approached, the herdsmen realized that they weren't spirits after all. At least apparently…stories of shape-shifting demons began to seep into the boys' minds and the weapons they clutched suddenly seemed pathetically useless.

"One of us has only to go and warn the soldiers!" cried Mdlalo.

Immediately he took his own advice and ran after the ***m'paa*** who were still treading the ground. Soon he disappeared from the pasture, leaving Sithole alone to deal with the intruders.

His heart was pounding madly in his chest, but he still had enough presence of mind to realize that the strangers weren't as numerous as he had first assumed. In fact, they didn't seem to be more than fifty. Many of them walked with difficulty, as if handicapped by injuries, suffering from fatigue, or both. Their clothes, soiled with blood and dust, were in poor condition. Some of the foreigners carried weapons, but not all. Sithole saw only one woman among them.

The closer the intruders got, the more it became obvious to the boy that he was facing a people much like his own. Apart from the unusual style of their clothing – suruali were not worn in Maguvurunde – the newcomers could have been passed off as merchants from the central regions of Mapungubwe.

But they came from the east, not from the west. Sithole knew next to nothing of the lands beyond the hills, except that they bordered on a body of water larger than anything known in Maguvurunde. There were also men among the strangers unlike any Sithole had encountered.

Majnun, Imaro, Pomphis, Rabir and Chukumba marched at the head of the intruders. Majnun and Chukumba were of an ethnicity resembling that of Sithole, although more slender than the people of Maguvurunde. But the other three were veritable aberrations to the boy: a man of adult proportions and the height of a child; a man whose skin was the color of caramel and not ebony; and a giant reminiscent of stories Sithole had heard of fierce warriors living in the Abamba Highlands, much further south.

Of all of them, it was Imaro who confused Sithole the most. For the warrior was staring at him, a gaze that carried a hint of contempt.
Sithole could not have known that Imaro's disapproval was not directed at him but at Mdlalo. Among the Ilyassai, abandoning his cattle in this way would have cost him the death of a coward.

Sithole clutched his staff tightly to his chest, but he was beginning to overcome his initial terror. When the intruders stopped a few feet from him, he found his voice.

- Who are you ? he asked firmly. What are you doing here ?

Chukumba stepped forward in front of the others to answer, in the language of Maguvurunde.

— We came to see the monomatapa.

Sithole's mouth opened; he took an involuntary step back and lowered his stick.

- Why ? was the only thing he managed to say.

Chukumba turned to Majnun and translated. Majnun spoke; Sithole's ears were troubled by this language which resembled his without being quite the same. Then Chukumba translated the king's words and the young herdsman felt a shiver of terror run down his spine.

“We come to warn him of the greatest danger his people have ever faced – a danger that will soon come to your lands. It may even be there already...

"And you're from the Sealands," Sithole said, as if thinking aloud. Beyond the hills where nothing grows and ghosts dance under the moon.

Chukumba's lips curved bitterly.

"There's a lot worse than ghosts in the hills these days, boy," he said. But yes, we do come from what you call the Countries of the Sea. Our kingdom is called Kitwana. Have you heard of it ?

Sithole nodded hesitantly. He had heard the name in stories told by merchants who had ventured beyond the hills, returning bearing exotic wares and telling of strange customs.

"You'll have to wait here for Mdlalo to bring the soldiers back," Sithole felt compelled to say, though he still wasn't sure the outsiders meant him harm. They will know what to do about you.

Chukumba smiled as he translated these words to his companions, who imitated him when they understood what the herdsman had said. A boy with a stick, holding back almost fifty people who had survived a battle against the ***izingogo.*** It was the fugitives' first chance to smile since leaving the ***bure.***

It was Imaro who answered Sithole. The boy looked at the warrior apprehensively; he saw that there was no more contempt in his eyes. His expression had softened. But he always carried within him a latent threat, like that of a lion resting between two hunts.

Imaro spoke at length to Chukumba.

- What did he say ? asked Sithole.

“He says you should go back to your cattle, because we won't hurt you. He says you are brave that you faced us while your friend was running away. But he also says you shouldn't have played when you were supposed to watch your cattle.

Sithole's eyes widened in bewilderment.

"How long have you been watching us?" he asked Chukumba.

"Long enough to realize it was just you two and this strange cattle in the pasture.

The silence that followed was long enough for Sithole to process the implications of Chukumba's words. The boy still didn't fully trust strangers. Yet they could easily have killed him and Mdlalo and had not. They seemed hungry and hadn't tried to steal one of the ***m'paa.*** And they said they had a message for the monomatapa, ruler of an empire of three kingdoms...

“The soldiers should be here soon,” Sithole said.

Then he turned back to the ***m'paa*** who were watching the strangers in a way not unlike the way he and Mdlalo had done not long before.

When the soldiers arrived, Sithole had lost all apprehension about the eastern men. With his permission, the Kitwanians shared the food and water he and Mdlalo had brought for the day. Provisions were scant for so many men but Sithole assured them that at Kumbura they would be well fed.

The boy was also losing his fear of Imaro. He had shown great interest in the ***m'paa.*** With the help of Chukumba as

As an interpreter, Imaro had asked Sithole many questions concerning the life of the spiral-horned beasts – questions proving that the Ilyassai had great knowledge of cattle. Sithole's respect for Imaro grew accordingly.

When the thunder of hoofs announced the imminent arrival of the soldiers, Sithole was teaching the warrior some Maguvurunde words referring to certain parts of the ***m'paa's body.***

"I don't understand Imaro," Majnun said to Pomphis as he waited for the soldiers. In a battle, he is a demon incarnate. Still, see how nice he is to this boy. And those beasts calmed down as soon as he touched them. And it was the man who froze the souls of the ***izingogo*** with fear – if we can say of their kind that they have souls. I'm not afraid to admit it: sometimes it also freezes mine...

'I have known him for many rains, Majnun,' said Pomphis. I have lost count of the number of times he has saved my life. Yet sometimes I'm afraid of him, too. I guess it's unavoidable when you know it.

Majnun nodded. He was not yet accustomed to the serious side of Pomphis, which he had hardly taken advantage of when he was a court jester.

“It is time for you to become king again, Majnun,” said Pomphis. The monomatapa will certainly be more willing to listen to one of his peers and his retinue, rather than a band of fugitives. Remember, Majnun: you are still king, even if your kingdom is in the hands of the Naama.

Majnun nodded again. He straightened his shoulders and adorned his face with a calm, regal expression. The irresponsible youngster Pomphis had known was as lost in the past as his ***mjimja*** personality . Like his father before him, Majnun needed no pageantry to confirm his identity as king.

He motioned for Chukumba to join him. Together they waited for the soldiers.

The eyes of the strangers widened in surprise as the troops trotted past the ***m'paa*** and formed a semi-circle blocking any possibility of escape into the ***sharangwa.*** The source of their astonishment was the mounts of the soldiers.

At first glance, it appeared that the Mapungubwe rode zebras, as the animals bore the same black and white stripes seen in the herds roaming the plains of Maguvurunde. Yet a closer inspection revealed that the soldiers' mounts were fine.

bigger than zebras. Their proportions were the same as those of horses, with longer extremities than those of their wild cousins. They only resembled them in their stripes, their stiff hairy manes and their bushy tails.

These animals were called ***mbizi,*** their riders ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi.*** The sun shone on the oiled leather harnesses and their polished metal ornaments. The ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** remained imperturbable in their saddles, apparently unperturbed by the intrusion of some fifty foreigners into their kingdom.

The soldiers were well armed. After hearing Mdlalo breathlessly tell his story of invaders appearing in the ***sharangwa,*** they hadn't known what to expect. They carried long, thin spears that could be used for both throwing and close combat. Round shields encrusted with iron discs hung from the side of their saddles. Their short straight swords were still sheathed.

The body of the ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** was covered with armor made of interwoven strips of leather. Leather and iron helmets protected their skulls. Beneath these, the ebony faces shone with a thin film of perspiration. Dark eyes watched the strangers, eyes that weighed, calculated, evaluated...

Soldiers and intruders stared at each other for a long moment in a silence broken only by the neighing of the ***mbizi*** and the sound of their hooves on the ground. The soldiers were beginning to realize that these ill-armed foreigners, who were obviously suffering from the effects of an arduous journey, were no great threat to the kingdom.

Msipo – the mtekwa of the Kumbura garrison – turns to Mdlalo who was riding up behind one of the soldiers.

"Is that the horde from the spirit trees that excited you so much, boy?" he asked sardonically. So these are the people who were preparing to invade the village and its garrison?

Mdlalo looked down.

“Come down, boy,” Msipo ordered.

The ***mtekwa*** 's age was beginning to become apparent in the white traces of the beard that covered his chin and the bulge of his stomach, which he could no longer hide as soon as he took off his armor. Msipo came from Amanyani, the westernmost of the Maguvurunde kingdoms. Long loyal to the monomatapa, the ***mtekwa*** had participated in the wars

resulting in the formation of what was now called "the empire of the monomatapa." »

When the ruler had sent him to Kumbura, Msipo had accepted his new assignment with apparent calm. He himself had advised that the Amanyani should be represented in all the outposts of the conquered kingdoms.

But being sent to Kumbura, on the edge of nothingness… Msipo had spent many nights wondering what he had done to lose favor with a man he had served so faithfully for so many years.

Despite the derision he had used to speak to the young herdsman, Msipo realized that the motley group of strangers in front of him was far from ordinary.

***Did he know?*** he wondered as he dismounted. ***Did he know something like this was going to happen? Did he send me here because he thought I was the only one who could handle it properly?***

The troops were well disciplined; they didn't need orders to know that they had to stay in the saddle while Msipo and Mdlalo approached the intruders. Spears lowered into attack position, the ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** formed a line that even a group better armed than the outsiders would have had difficulty breaking.

Eyes still lowered, Mdlalo remained two paces behind Msipo as he advanced towards the strangers. The ***mtekwa*** noticed that some showed apprehension at being confronted by mounted troops. His eyes were drawn to one of those staring fearlessly at the spearheads. He had a tall, cat-like muscle build of a familiar type.

***What does an Abamba do with these people?*** Msipo wondered, watching Imaro.

Msipo questioned the fugitives directly and in detail. Through Chukumba, the ***mtekwa*** quickly learned that he was dealing with something far more important than he had first realized. If the outsiders were telling the truth, he was talking to an exiled king from the Sealands, an emissary from the almost mythical land of Cush, and a warrior to play a major role in an apocalyptic conflict that had already begun. …

Addressing mainly Majnun and Pomphis, Msipo was however fascinated by Imaro. Somehow the giant seemed to him

familiar… He looked a lot like the Abamba, but was also subtly different.

Msipo had seen men like Imaro before, when the Amanyani were fighting the Abamba tribes. But since those days many rains had passed and more pressing questions preoccupied him. Yet the mystery emerging from Imaro refused to dissipate. It gnawed at her mind like a chipmunk chewing acacia leaves.

“If half of what you say is true – and I'm not implying you're lying in any way – the monomatapa will be eager to speak with you,” Msipo said when he finished his questioning. Personally, I believe you. I have spoken with merchants who have traveled through the Sealands and your words agree with what they have told me. The monomatapa will be particularly interested in the Naama invasion.

"All we ask is for a chance to talk to him about it," Majnun said.

“The monomatapa will give you all the respect due to another monarch,” Msipo assured him.

As he questioned the strangers, the tension had eased to the point that Msipo ordered his men to dismount and return their spears to the leather scabbards hanging from the side of their saddles.
The ***mbizi*** grazed near the ***m'paa,*** under the watchful gaze of the soldiers and the young guards. Mdlalo was not looking at Sithole.

“Ask the warrior how an Abamba managed to get as far north as the Sealands,” Msipo said to Chukumba, returning his attention to Imaro.

Chukumba translated those words, then Imaro's response.

“I am not an Abamba. I am an Ilyassai. Why do you say that I am abamba?

Hearing the name 'Ilyassai', Msipo flinched and regained his control, hoping that Imaro hadn't noticed his reaction. But the warrior was watching the ***mtekwa*** carefully : he had noticed.

"Tell him he looks like the Abamba people who live in the south of our country," Msipo said to Chukumba. I had no hidden intention in asking my question.

Chukumba translated. Imaro's eyes didn't leave the ***mtekwa*** but he didn't add anything.

"The monomatapa will arrive in Nalitali, capital of Mapungubwe, in less than a week," Msipo said, addressing all the foreigners. He divides his time between all the capitals of the empire so that no kingdom can take precedence over another. We will spend the night here in Kumbura. Then a six-day walk will take us to Nalitali. When we get there, I'll arrange a quick audience with the monomatapa.

"That suits us," said Majnun, speaking for the others and for himself.

Msipo nodded with a hint of deference, then ordered his troops to escort the foreigners to Kumbura. Returning to his ***mbizi,*** the ***mtekwa*** felt Imaro's gaze continue to burn his back.

***The monomatapa will be especially interested in you, my friend,*** Msipo thought as he mounted his saddle. ***A man who calls himself ilyassai and looks like an Abamba… Yes, he will be very interested in you..***

## INTERLUDE

***In Mlongo fear adopted a multitude of disguises. Bands*** of izingogo ***haunted the streets like packs of wild animals. Here and there you could see an*** unthlatu ***whose scales glistened in the sun. The*** irimu, ***lion-demons, had the power to take on a human appearance, but in Mlongo, they did not deign to conceal themselves. They walked through the city like lions having***

***In Mlongo, hordes of Abamba warriors invaded stalls and market places, looting supplies that had quickly evaporated. Flying their war feathers in the wind, brandishing their zebu-skin shields, the Abamba had an insatiable fire in their eyes; a fire lit by the*** mchawi. ***They no longer had a will of their own, living only for the battles and bloodshed promised by their Erriten masters. Soon there would be other fights, soon… In***

***Mlongo there were Naama who were not Erriten because many were those who aspired to this status, but very few who reached it. The Naama were a yellow-skinned, slender-bodied people. Their heads, slightly larger than normal, were covered in pepper-colored hair that grew in clumps leaving small portions of the scalp bare. Never before had the Naama ventured so far, to the north of the lands of the Reaches. It was the ordinary Naama, those who had not totally sacrificed their souls to the Mashataan, who guided the actions of the Erriten's hun***

***In Mlongo, the Naama avoided the Abamba. The Abamba avoided the*** izingogo, ***the*** unthlatu ***and the*** irimu. ***And the few Kitwanians who were left alive shunned everyone but their fellows.***

***At Mlongo, five Erriten occupied the building that had been Majnun's palace. They reigned in a throne room devoid of all pomp and splendour. No servant surrounded them. They didn't hav***

***use. Their needs were met by the emerald spheres that swayed above their heads.***

***The Erriten saw...***

***A golden light from the north was advancing along the coast; she offended the senses of the Erriten but they continued to observe her steady advance.***

Let her come, ***they thought.*** She does not know what we have sown around her.

***A force was gathering in the south, in the Abamba Highlands, like a gathering storm. At the center of it throbbed an emanation with which the Erriten had long been familiar, an ambition they had long been aware of.***

Don't challenge us anymore, ***they thought to Bohu.*** Do what we let's say, and you won't suffer anymore...

***Bohu's only response was a mocking laugh.***

***In Maguvurunde, other forces were gathering. Unease gripped the Erriten as they watched their last attempt to eliminate Imaro fail.***

We can't stop it, ***they thought.*** They are going to meet.
But that doesn't matter. Soon everything will be played between our weapon and that of the kandisa. And ours will be the strongest.

***In Mlongo, fear reigned in many forms…***

## 13.
## ONE NIGHT IN KUMBURA.

The trip to Kumbura was short and peaceful. Although foreigners were officially prisoners, they were treated with courtesy by the ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi.*** Some soldiers even gave their mounts to those Kitwanians who were disabled by their wounds.

Pomphis and Majnun rode near Msipo, accompanied by Chukumba who acted as interpreter; the three of them engaged in an animated conversation about the recent outbreaks of violence in the Abamba Highlands, the possible connection between them and the Erriten. Already Pomphis acquired an appreciable knowledge of the language of Maguvurunde.

Imaro chose to accompany the young herdsmen when they brought the ***m'paa*** back to their enclosure. They exchanged few words. Imaro didn't even look at Mdlalo.

Every now and then Sithole would smile smugly at his comrade and he would look away. Moving smoothly among the ***m'paa,*** Imaro noticed nothing: he was talking to the beasts, touching them, learning their individual characteristics. Among the strange livestock of Kumbura, Imaro found a peace he had not known since his last days in the forge of Arkhaman.

Then he looked at Sithole and saw his lost son, Kilewo, to whom he could never teach the secret of the bonds between an Ilyassai and his ***ngombe.***
He saw Akhini, looking like the younger brother he never had.

The moment of peace slips away. Imaro walked away from the herd and walked only the rest of the way separating it from Kumbura.

Kumbura was a small village but gave a good clue as to how the people of the rest of Maguvurunde lived. The houses, called ***mhuri,*** had thick oval walls, made of mud bricks reinforced with lime. These were covered with ***daga,*** a thick, weather-resistant clay .

rain. The ***daga*** was painted white, its surface covered with multicolored geometric patterns. The thatched roofs looked like flatter versions of the hats of the two young herdsmen.

Each family in Kumbura lived in a compound that included living quarters, a granary, and the ancestral tomb. The speakers were arranged like the spokes of a wheel – with the center of the village, the hub. There stood a conical tower five times the size of a man. It was made of unsealed blocks of granite but fitted so tightly that a knife blade could not have slipped between them.

At the top of the tower was the gigantic soapstone sculpture of a resting bird. The execution of this one was almost abstract; the wings and feathers were suggested by slight incisions. It was the large hooked beak of the bird that indicated the true meaning of the carving.
It was a representation of Shiri-ya-Mheni, the Bird of Lightning, the symbol of a new empire.

Foreigners found that the people of Kumbura were friendly, inquisitive and had a very generous sense of hospitality. After a brief flurry of organization, arrangements were made for the strangers to be received in various family compounds. Sithole convinced his parents to take in Imaro and Pomphis.

As soldiers rode back to their fortress and families guided their guests home, the strangers gradually relaxed and enjoyed their first real respite from danger and hardship. Despite their language differences, the two groups managed to communicate through smiles, gestures and bits of translation provided by an overwhelmed Chukumba.

As night approached, kitchen fires began to crackle, gourds were filled with millet beer, and the speakers rang out with excited shouts. The arrival of the fugitives from Kitwana was the first significant event to occur in the village since the erection of Shiri-ya Mheni's tower.

The Kumburians did not learn until later of the true importance of the guests they had hosted.

"So we'll go together," Msipo said.

Unlike the rest of the soldiers, the ***mtekwa*** remained in the village. He wanted to learn more about these strangers who claimed to be so many things and only had words to back them up.

He was seated in the outer courtyard of the compound of the ***bhoki,*** the deputy head of Kumbura. Majnun was there, too. The three men occupied stools, only a hand's length high.

Msipo had removed his armor; he was shirtless under the setting sun, drinking millet beer from a calabash decorated with carved lions.
Without his armor, he seemed less official, more human...

"Do you have to leave so soon, ***mtekwa ?"*** asked the ***bhoki.***

He was a portly, dark-skinned man, wearing a loincloth and a cape covering the upper half of his body. The skin left bare by these clothes was covered with sweat. His eyes kept moving from Msipo to Majnun or Chukumba.

"What reason do we have to stay?" Msipo asked dryly.

"We want to see the monomatapa as soon as possible," Majnun said through Chukumba, as the ***bhoki*** opened his mouth to argue.

Having no response to this, he chose to be silent, emptied his calabash and called one of his wives to get another. He was trying to hide his desire for Jemile, the only woman among the strangers. It was her unusual appearance that attracted him, but he knew he couldn't act on her wishes; not with six wives…

Majnun, sensing the ***bhoki*** 's unease without knowing the cause, decided to try to satisfy his curiosity about the monarch they were going to meet. He asked Chukumba to translate his words into diplomatic phrases.

“In Kitwana we know little about Maguvurunde,” said the interpreter. Unfortunately for us, of course. Yet our merchants have always painted us the image of a region glorifying itself with war. From time to time one of the most important kingdoms dominated, but the others were quick to overthrow it.

Yet all of Maguvurunde is now united under one man with the title of ruler of Amanyani. I heard that he is a foreigner, an Abamba, not even a native of Maguvurunde. What kind of man is your monomatapa, Msipo? How did he achieve what I suppose no native of this country could have done?

Msipo gave Majnun a long respectful look. He saw that beneath the fatigue, the drawn features, the defeated expression of the young king, lay a reserve of strength and determination. Majnun had lost a lot in

not much time. But in compensation he had gained the maturity and wisdom he despised in his youth. He was like a sapling that survived fire and storm: stronger, tougher.

Msipo knew that the Kitwanian would prove a valuable ally in the inevitable struggle when the monomatapa heard the news brought by the outsiders. For these confirmed the sovereign's own suspicions about the Naama.

"You are right to want to know more about the monomatapa," Msipo said. And since that is so, listen...

In the compound of Sithole's family, Imaro and Pomphis ate well and drank soberly. They were seated on low stools in the courtyard of the main ***mhuri .*** The seats were arranged in a circle around a raffia mat on which were cups of fruits, vegetables and well-cooked meats. Each cup passed slowly from hand to hand around the circle, until it was empty.

Sithole's father had two wives and four other children: two sons younger than Sithole and two daughters older. The first wore a braided headband signifying that she was to get married soon. The youngest had only a few more rains than Sithole. She was also of marriageable age but her father had not yet found a suitable match for her.

Between hosts and guests, conversation was limited, but by combining smiles and gestures with Pomphis' linguistic skills, a decent level of communication was achieved. They mainly talked about simple things that all the inhabitants of Nyumbani could understand easily despite their differences in language or culture.

Although Sithole was an important center of attention – he had been the first to meet the strangers – great curiosity surrounded Imaro and Pomphis. The younger boys thought it fantastic that an adult could not be taller than them. They kept chatting among themselves; Pomphis imitated them so well that he made them burst out laughing.

The youngest daughter also found Bambuti interesting, but the other women only had eyes for Imaro. Their gazes devoured the massive contours of his shoulders, torso, and arms. They were trying to decipher feelings behind the dark, closed door of his eyes. But the Ilyassai paid them no heed.

In Mapungubwe, the men dressed simply, wearing only loincloths and capes. It was the women who used the clothes as

decoration. Their dresses, called ***njobos,*** are adorned with colorful embroidered designs. The material from which they were cut – cotton or leather – revealed intriguing patches of skin as those who wore them moved – as the women of the house now did.

Sithole and his father smiled indulgently for their efforts. Among the people of Maguvurunde, love was an art, like drumming, dancing or storytelling – an art that could only be mastered and improved through practice.
So Sithole's father burst out laughing when he heard his youngest wife and oldest daughter arguing.

Pomphis nudged Imaro in the ribs.

“I think they're arguing over which one's going to sleep with you tonight, my friend,” he said before chuckling.

He already knew that the youngest of the girls would be his mating companion.

"These people are generous in everything," he continued. Even their wives. If only more Nyumbani people were so magnanimous!

Imaro didn't respond to Pomphis' levity. The Bambuti then remembered that his friend hadn't taken a wife since Tanisha's assassination.
A worried crease crossed his forehead as he watched the Ilyassai's frozen expression.

***Whoever wins might not be so happy,*** he thought apprehensively.

He was about to talk to Imaro when one of the little boys put his arms around him and knocked him off his stool. Pomphis laughed as he rolled on the floor with the child.

***A little exercise on a mat might do him good,*** he thought, as Sithole's other brother joined in the fight.

“This is truly a story for storytellers,” Majnun said when Msipo had finished recounting how the monomatapa had forged his empire. Not that I don't believe you…far from it. But the kingdoms of Maguvurunde had been fighting each other for so long, and had been at war with the Abamba for even longer. Yet this man united the kingdoms and allied them with many Abamba tribes... all to fulfill a prophecy as old as the stones of which your cities are made.

And to think that he had foreseen the disaster that would destroy Kitwana. Whether only a message had been able to reach us by one of your merchants...

"It would have been too late," said Msipo. On the other hand, from what you say about the Naama's allies, such a message would not have been of any help to you. But with the one you bring us, we may be able to help you find your kingdom after saving ours.

'That's too generous,' Majnun muttered, hoping that Chukumba would dismiss the ironic tone of his translation.

As the sun finished setting, the men gathered in the compound of the ***bhoki*** abandoned millet beer to empty cups of ***kachasu,*** a strong liquor distilled from sorghum. The ***bhoki*** 's chin was soon resting on his cloak and his cup on the ground, near his inert fingers. Msipo and the two Kitwanians, consummate drinkers, continued to empty their cups and converse profusely.

— The woman who became the queen of the monomatapa also seems remarkable than himself, Majnun observed.

"Yes," agreed Msipo. I always asked the monomatapa how he knew she would come back to him. He never wanted to say it.
Yet one day, several rains after he had lost her, she was there. She came back, thanks to Musaki the Great God; for the monomatapa had taken no other wife; in the three kingdoms, conspirators wanted to use this absence of heir to their advantage.

"Do they have children now?" Majnun asked.

- Nope. She is sterile. But since his return, the monomatapa has started taking more wives, who have given him children. The eldest son, the heir, has not yet had ten rains.

“Warlord, slave, rebel, king, emperor…” Majnun said, thinking aloud. If a man can help the kandisa in her fight against the Naama, it is this one. Think about it, Msipo! The Naama crushed between the Cush and the empire like a seed between two stones!

"Yes," said Msipo. And the monomatapa himself would guide our armies. Although his hair begins to turn white, he is still a lion in battle. No one can resist him.

“I know one who could.

- Who ? Oh, you think of that big warrior that looks like an Abamba. Imaro, is that right? Yes… Maybe he could. There's something about him...

"Sire," interrupted Chukumba hoarsely. I'm sorry, but despite all that drinking, my throat can't hold anymore.

Majnun shook his head, repentant. He had forgotten that Chukumba was repeating the conversation of the two men, trying to convey the meaning of their words in two different languages.

"I'm being disrespectful, my old friend," he said apologetically. ***Mtekwa,*** I'm sure we exchanged valuable information last night.
Besides, I understand that we had to go to Nalitali under guard, but I hope that we are no longer prisoners.

"No, you're not," Msipo said. I suggest we earn our mats. We will leave early in the morning and the journey will be long.

— Good suggestion. And him ? Majnun asked, pointing to the ***snoring bhoki .***

“Don't worry about him. His wives will take care of it.

The three men rose from their stools, staggering slightly, and entered the enclosure. Some of the ***bhoki*** 's children appeared to escort them to their quarters.

***I must tell Pomphis what I learned about this monomatapa,*** Majnun thought as he stretched out on the thick layer of raffia that would serve as his bed. ***But I'd bet he already knows...***

Majnun relaxed to wait for the arrival of the daughter or wife of the ***bhoki*** who would share his mat. He hadn't chosen her, not caring which one it would be. What he wanted was a supple body lying next to his, which would help him forget for one night what had happened to his kingdom and to himself.

On another mat, Msipo was deep in his own thoughts.

***You are smart, young king,*** thought the soldier. ***But I didn't tell you everything.***

Chipo, the eldest of Sithole's father's wives, awoke to muffled crying. They were coming from the entrance to the main ***mhuri .*** The wife detached herself from her sleeping husband and stood up. Then she went to the entrance which overlooked the inner courtyard of the enclosure.

Curled up against the wall of the ***mhuri,*** she found the youngest of the concubines, whose name was Sangeya, naked, crouching like a small animal facing the jaws of a predator.

The wife leaned beside her young fellow, fear knotting her stomach. It was the concubine who had won the battle over who would sleep with Imaro that night. Each time she had observed the gigantic warrior, the elder had had a feeling of apprehension that she

couldn't explain – as if a lion shared their food and drink.

"Sangeya, what happened?" she whispered, taking the other woman in her arms. Did he hurt you?

'No,' managed to articulate Sangeya between two sobs.

"What happened then?"

“He…He refused me; he did not allow me to touch him. Oh Chipo what's wrong with me?

Sangeya burst into a new wave of sobs. Chipo contented himself with hugging her, calmly, letting her overcome the emotional storm that was raging inside her. When the tears dried, Chipo helped the concubine up and took her shining cheeks in his hands.

"Everything is fine with you, Sangeya," she said. Has Mloso ever refused you? Come on, come with me. You'll sleep in the ***mhuri*** I use when you're with him. And don't tell anyone what you just told me. Promise me!

- Why ?

“Right now, things are happening beyond our comprehension. In a way this man, Imaro, is important. I feel it.
But it is also dangerous. It is better to let the monomatapa deal with him and the other strangers. In the morning he will be gone. Come with me now and rejoice that he didn't hurt you.

“I think he was trying not to hurt me,” Sangeya said in a calmer voice.

"Come," said Chipo, guiding the concubine into the yard. And remember: don't say any of this to Sithole. He worships this Imaro. If he discovered such a thing, he couldn't live with it.

"I won't say anything," Sangeya promised.

But as Chipo led her to the other ***mhuri,*** she looked back, to the one where Imaro was, and wondered what was playing behind the leonine glint in his eyes.

Imaro was as stiff as a stone on his mat. Every muscle in his body was tense to the max as he tried to stop himself from moving.

When Sangeya came, pressed her body to his, her mouth to his, Imaro remembered…

***Tanisha, as he had last seen her… decapitated, mutilated, only identifiable by the shreds of her clothes… Tanisha who had loved him only to die horribly under the blows of those who hated him…***

***Keteke, his first love, as he had last seen her… head intact, features frozen forever in a silent scream of helpless terror… body reduced to bloody bones, bound together by bits of tendon… Keteke who had loved him only to die horribly under the blows of those who hated him...***

***As Sangeya licked his throat and chest, Imaro saw Tanisha and Keteke rise and point accusing fingers at him; one of torn, bloody flesh; the other of bare bone.***

Anger had boiled in Imaro's withered soul. The desire to kill had traveled from his mind to his arms, his hands. At the last moment, his hands pushed Sangeya away from him. When she had collapsed on the floor of the ***mhuri,*** he had tensed his muscles into a single, unchanging mass. If he hadn't, he would have killed Sangeya.

Long after she had left, Imaro's gaze was still frozen in a darkness broken only by the slits in the ***mhuri*** 's thatched roof . Gradually, he allowed his muscles to relax, ignoring the pain the relaxation was causing him.

For the first time since his incarceration at Cush, Imaro heard a voice that wasn't his speaking inside his skull.

***Weep and mourn, Imaro,*** she taunted. ***Cry and mourn...***

Imaro did not answer.

## 14.
# A MEETING ON THE ROAD

Soon after Jua's long ascent into the sky began, soldiers and strangers began to assemble in the shadow of the Thunderbird Tower. Mbizi were ***saddled*** for the guests to go to Nalitali. The night before, it had been decided that the Kitwanians who had suffered the most in the battle against the ***izingogo*** would remain in Kumbura.

Most of the village population was there to bid farewell to the strangers. Sangeya's absence was noticed but no one cared.
***She needs to sleep to recover from her night with the giant,*** the morning rumor whispered. Those who knew the truth were silent.

Msipo allowed the farewell to last longer than he would ordinarily have tolerated. He knew that the excitement generated by the arrival of the strangers would lessen the tension existing between the Kumburians and his sold

Finally everyone was in the saddle, ready to go. Of the fifty fugitives who came to Kumbura, about twenty would make the trip to Nalitali. Most had experience with horses and could therefore master the ***mbizi.*** Only Rabir, more used to bridges than to mounts, seemed uncomfortable in his saddle.

On Msipo's order, the company marched out of the village, passing between the rows of ***mhuri.*** They joined in a field outside Kumbura a detachment of escort troops coming from the fortress. It was there that foreigners discovered yet another marvel of Maguvurunde.

Most of the soldiers were indeed ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi.*** But with them were also ten ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere*** – rhinoceros riders.

Like the ***mbizi,*** rhinos were domesticated descendants of wild animals. Chipimbere had ***longer*** legs and less massive bodies than the mastodons that haunted the plains. Furthermore,

hundreds of rains devoted to crossbreeding, had created an animal more intelligent and less irascible than the wild rhinoceros.

As domesticated as they were, ***chipimbere*** were still impressive beasts. Yet they responded to the orders of their riders with the same alacrity as a ***mbizi.***

Looking at the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere,*** Pomphis, sitting precariously on a saddle far too big for him, remembered the ***gunkwu*** that the Cushites rode.

***These people will make excellent allies,*** he thought as Msipo gave the signal to depart. After traversing several miles of grassy terrain, the travelers reached a wide road, paved with flat slabs of granite. Like a long arrow, it pointed towards a valley in the distance.

"There is a town in this valley," Msipo said. This will be our first step.

Majnun and Chukumba rode near the ***mtekwa.*** The king was trying to spare his interpreter, but he felt the need to ask a question that had obsessed him since he had seen the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere.***

"If Maguvurunde is at peace, why do we need such an armed escort, ***mtekwa ?"***

Msipo's eyes narrowed as he considered his answer.

“In remote parts of the kingdom, you're always likely to encounter ***mpunia*** —bandits,” he said finally. Moreover, the Abamba of the South are not as peaceful as those who live further west. Their attacks are not uncommon.

Majnun nodded; he understood. Before the invasion of Kitwana by the Naama, bandits and barbarians had been among his chief preoccupations. Yet the Abamba seemed to live too far south to be considered the threat Msipo described. Majnun kept that last thought to himself.

But Msipo was watching him intently.

***This one is even more attentive than Imaro. I'd better watch them both.***

The clicking of hooves on the stone accompanied the daydreams of travellers, as the road slowly descended into the attractive valley.

They entered the valley and spent the night in his town without incident. As the days passed, it became clear that no threat

would not be to be feared from the ***mpunia*** or the Abamba. The soldiers remained on the alert, but they advanced in loose formation, more to guide the strangers than to guard them.

As the road went deeper into the interior of the kingdom, strangers learned that Maguvurunde was a land of valleys and plateaus, interspersed with rocky peaks and thick forests. These were circumvented by the stone ways which connected towns and cities.

The closer travelers approached Nalitali, the larger the population became. They saw farms, pastures in ***m'paa*** and towns reproducing Kumbura in a bigger way. Most of these were surrounded by granite brick walls.

Along the way, they met other travellers. Merchants led caravans of ***m'paa*** and ***mbizi*** laden with rolls of cloth, baskets of grain, copper wire and gold. The caravans were guarded by ***hard-faced nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** who watched the soldiers without averting their eyes. They weren't wearing military armor.

“Mercenaries,” Msipo said, spitting on the floor as he passed them. A warrior should be loyal to something other than gold.

In a high rocky area, they passed a stone-walled construction that blended in with the contours of a stack of rocks.
The walls incorporated the rocks into them, so that the natural and man-made aspects of the construction were unified into a whole.

- What is that ? asked Pomphis who was riding close to Msipo.

In a short time he had acquired a sufficient knowledge of the language of Maguvurunde to be able to discuss without an interpreter.

“It's a mhondoro temple ,” ***Msipo*** replied. This is where we go when we wish to honor the spirits of our Great Ancestors.
Sometimes such a spirit returns and possesses its descendant, who then gains the qualities that made the ancestor valuable.

"Is there a special ceremony for that?" asked Pomphis.

- Yes.

"And does it work all the time?"

— Non.

As Pomphis turned his head away to hide a knowing smile, three women appeared on the walls of the temple. They were naked until the

cut. Their faces and bodies were painted with a pale yellow pigment that even under the rays of the sun gave them a spectral appearance.
Helmets of monkey fur, speckled with white feathers, covered their heads. The women observed the travelers without blinking.

"The ***mhondoro*** priestesses ," Msipo replied to Pomphis' silent question. It is through them that the Great Ancestors speak.

The Mapungubwe looked uncomfortable as they rode under the gaze of the priestesses. The strangers were contaminated by the mood of their escort – the silent scrutiny of the painted women was irritating. Only Imaro returned their gaze.

Long after leaving the temple behind, travelers felt
still the eyes of the priestesses lingering on their backs…

Even higher up was a region of gold mines. The hills were dotted with narrow lines following the quartz veins harboring the precious metal.

The mines were operated by slaves. Their long files stretched, descending and ascending the winding paths that encircled the bare slopes. Some were from Maguvurunde, mostly criminals or men who sold their freedom to settle their debts.
Many were Abamba, mostly prisoners of war.

All foreigners were familiar with slavery. Majnun's palace had housed many slaves. In fact some of the refugees who had joined him in the ***bure*** were part of it, even if after the fall of Mlongo their status was no different from that of free citizens.

Rabir had observed slaves loading and unloading the cargo of ***the Epesi Nyuni*** in all the ports north of the Naama. When Pomphis was ***mjimja*** in Azania, it was part of the possessions of the sha'a. Imaro had never been a slave, but when he was captured by the ***haramia,*** they gave him the choice between a series of lashes or slavery.
He had endured the ordeal without saying a word and had finally become the leader of the bandits.

Imaro remained silent as he rode between the gigantic masses of rock, but anger burned behind his eyes. Part of it was directed at himself as Bohu's trail had gone cold.

Ever since he and his companions had come out of the hills, the kandisa's bracelets had remained silent, inert. If he hadn't joined

the loyalists, he could have tried to find the trail. But he had to think of Rabir and Pomphis. He couldn't leave them.

So he had come to the rendezvous as soon as he had escaped the ***izingogo.*** Now, having lost track of his prey, he felt lost, useless. The prospect of meeting the mono-matapa interested him very little.

The cauldron of bitter hatred that separated Imaro from everyone else was beginning to simmer. It was when they descended back into the lowlands that he sprang to the surface.

Nalitali was only a day's journey away when a scout from the escort galloped back to Msipo.

"We'll have to get off the road soon, ***mtekwa,*** " he reported. She is under repair.

Msipo mumbled a series of curses. Out of the way, the mounts of his troops would inevitably trample the gardens of one or another ***ndau,*** the nobles of Mapungubwe. Msipo was himself an ***ndau*** but of low stock; that's why he was in the army.

The flat, green region that flanked the road was dotted with the enclosures of the wealthiest ***ndaus .*** Closer to the city walls, Msipo knew he would find the piled up ***mhuri*** of the poor. The ***mtekwa cared*** little for their whining. He would have walked through a poor man's land without hesitation. But an unfavorable remark of one or two ***ndaus*** would compromise the prestige he hoped to gain by being the first to lead strangers and their news before the monomatapa.

"I don't want to be late," he said when he had finished swearing.

Reluctantly he ordered his men to escort the strangers off the road. The grass they were crossing now was well maintained. Flowerbeds were planted in patterns reminiscent of those that decorated the ***mhuri.*** In the distance the white walls of the ***ndau*** enclosures gleamed in the sun.

Msipo grimaced as his men's ***mbizi*** and ***chipimbere*** flattened swaths of lovingly planted broom. The edifice of personal triumph he had erected in his dreams was beginning to crumble...

The ***mtekwa*** 's mood did not improve as they passed a group of slaves replacing some of the granite slabs that made up the road. The foremen were mercenaries; real soldiers would never stoop to such a task – or so Msipo thought.

He watched three men groan under the weight of a paving stone. Of them were Mapungubwe, the third a robust Abamba.

Suddenly one of the Mapungubwe lost his grip on the stone. Despite the efforts of the two men to hold her in place, she slipped between their hands and crashed to the ground where she split in two under the impact.

Swearing, one of the overseers unrolled the leather whip hanging from his belt and walked quickly towards the slaves. He flicked his wrist briskly. The whip snaked through the air and struck the Abamba. Approaching, the mercenary continued to whip the same slave, ignoring the two Mapungubwe.

Few travelers paid attention to the incident. They had seen slaves whipped many times. Some of them had administered such punishments to their own servants.

Imaro had been whipped only once, by Mbuto. He hadn't uttered a single cry during the flogging. The Abamba wasn't screaming either, but Imaro could see it fast approaching the moment it was going to crack. He didn't want to hear the howl ready to escape from the Abamba's throat.

Imaro leapt out of the saddle of his ***mbizi*** in a single catlike leap.

Landing on both feet, he ran across the road. The slaves and their overseers had barely noticed the travellers. Yet their attention was suddenly drawn to the giant stranger who snatched the whip from the stunned guardian's hand.

Imaro threw the whip to the ground. Overcoming his initial astonishment, the foreman reached for his sword. Before he could draw the weapon from its sheath, the mercenary's wrist was caught in a bone-breaking grip. The next moment it was him screaming.

Holding his broken wrist, he fell to his knees. Imaro's eyes
met those of the Abamba. The slave neither spoke nor moved.

Among the Ilyassai, Imaro had always been set apart, because of his strangeness. With her thin, mahogany skin and fine features, her mother's people looked no more like her than a leopard looks like a lion.
Among them, he was different.

But the Abamba.

It was the first time he had been so close to a member of one of the southern tribes. The slave was almost as massive as Imaro; his face, with broad cheekbones and thick features, resembled Imaro's. Her skin was the same deep amber. If all the Abamba

resembled the one in front of him, Imaro would be no different among them. There were subtle differences in type between the two men but they were largely overshadowed by the similarities.

Imaro was burning to talk to the slave but he couldn't find the words. And even if he had found them, he still didn't know the language of Maguvurunde well enough to make himself understood. The slave's eyes remained blank, as if nothing had happened since he had dropped the stone.

Imaro's action had been so sudden, so unexpected, that neither the soldiers nor the foremen had reacted. Now the other Guardians were drawing their weapons and starting to converge on him. Before they could reach it, Msipo and two ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere*** intercepted them. The overseers knew they only had authority over the slaves they led.

Msipo dismounted and came to Imaro. His nostrils widened in anger. Her lips were puckered. A few crushed flowers in a ***ndau*** 's garden were nothing compared to what the stranger had just done...

- Put away your weapons! he said dryly. This is my responsibility.

The head foreman had leaned close to the man whose wrist Imaro had broken.

"If this Abamba is yours, you should keep control of it," he said, rising. After what he did, if he were mine, there wouldn't be any skin left on his back.

"He's not an Abamba," said Msipo.

"He looks like it, and shouldn't be loose." I am against the idea of the Abamba being free.

"Our monomatapa is an Abamba," Msipo said grimly. You would like to chain him too?

"It's different," said the foreman, looking away.

- Of course it's different! Msipo exploded. And you, people of the East, if you don't understand it, you...

During this brief conversation, Pomphis jumped down and ran alongside Imaro. He gazed with conflicting emotions at the picture presented to him on the side of the road; Imaro and the Abamba looking at ea

silently; Msipo and the foreman discussing politics. The latter's mouth opened in astonishment when he saw the pygmy.

"Imaro," said Pomphis quickly. You are not in your country. You can't interfere in the affairs of another people just because you don't like what you see. I thought you had already learned that.

Imaro looked down at the Bambuti. The warrior remained silent, but Pomphis read his eyes. And what he read sent a shiver of fear running down his spine.

Turning to the foreman, Pomphis addressed him in passable Maguvurunde.

“I'm sorry for what my friend did. He doesn't like whips.

The foreman barely heard Pomphis' words. He had never seen a pygmy before and was fascinated by the small size and adult proportions of the Bambuti.

Then the foreman scanned the horsemen gathered on the other side of the road. He saw the foreigners escorted by the soldiers, remembered the rumors circulating in Nalitali: the commander of the Kumbura fortress was bringing people from the Sealands to town...

“You are Msipo, aren't you? he said.

"For you, mercenary, it will be ***mtekwa !"***

“You should leave then, ***mtekwa.*** And you can be sure the monomatapa will hear about what your Abamba-like friend did to one of my men.

Msipo did not answer. The people of the East knew nothing of the friendship existing between the monomatapa and him. The foreman's threat was as empty as last night's gourd of beer. Yet Msipo was happy to have sent a horseman to Nalitali the night before they left Kumbura. He had arrived several days earlier; now the monomatapa was ready for their coming.

"Come," he said to Imaro and Pomphis.

As Msipo climbed back onto his ***mbizi,*** the strangers began to cross the road again to join their own beasts. However, before they reached the ***mbizi,*** the Abamba slave shouted something to Imaro.

- What did he say ? the Ilyassai asked Pomphis.

“He said he wasn't thanking you for what you did. As soon as you are out of sight, he will be beaten again.

Imaro walked over to the foreman, who put his hand on the handle of his sword when he saw him approaching.

"You beat him…because…him…dropped the stone?" he asked, scratching the Maguvurunde's tongue.

The other understood what he meant.

- Yes, what can it do to you?

Imaro did not answer. He approached another block of granite, placed by one of the groups of slaves. He reached down, grabbed the edge, and lifted it off the ground. Planting himself firmly on the ground for a foothold, he grabbed both edges of the stone and hoisted it to shoulder height.

Then he carried her down the road to where the broken block lay. He wore only a Maguvurunde-style loincloth, donated by the Sithole family. All the muscles in his back and arms were proudly erect.

A hole in the road marked the spot from which an old block had been removed. Showing none of the strain his effort was costing him, Imaro precisely inserted his stone into it. Then he straightened his massive body, wet with sweat.

“Don't…beat him…more,” he told the foreman.

This one did not answer. Just like his slave, he watched speechless as the warrior climbed back up on his ***mbizi.*** The hooves of ***chipimbere*** and mbizi ***echoed*** on the flower-strewn ground as the travelers moved away.

Pomphis always rode close to Msipo. This one looked at him.

“I only know one other man who can do what your friend did. with this stone, he said.

- Who ? Pomphis asked, already anticipating Msipo's answer.

“The man we are going to see in Nalitali – the monomatapa.

## 15.
# YOU LIGHT UP AND DIE

An armada of vessels filled the port of Mavindi. There were warships there, combat craft equipped with rams, catapults and giant bows, capable of launching flaming arrows above the highest walls. There were transport boats there, full of soldiers and animals of war. There were supply ships there, laden with enough provisions to supply the needs of thousands of men and fighting animals.

The boats occupied practically all available anchorage points in the main port of the kingdom of Azania. Yet none were Azanian...

The emblems of four northern nations floated from the masts of the armada: the crossed javelins of Engaruku, the elephant tusk of Punt, the half moon of Axum and the sun disk of Cush. The latter was more often represented than the other three combined.

The armada had slipped silently into the harbour, under cover of a moonless night. The Azanians had awakened to discover dozens of alien ships, appearing almost by magic. Indeed, during the first wave of panic caused by the arrival of the armada, a rumor spread in the city, saying that the kingdom was invaded by the ***jinns*** sent by the Naama.

Soldiers rushing out of their barracks held back the crowd of frightened Ba-Mavindi who invaded the quays. Cries rose from the crowd: ***jinns !*** Invasion! while the soldiers attempted to impose order and organize a defence.

"The ***haramia*** have returned and they're in cahoots with demons!" shouted a cloth merchant with the face of a soldier. We are lost !

"Do ***jinns*** and bandits sail on Cushite boats?" retorted the soldier.

But under the pointed helmet, the eyes were troubled.

The invaders' boats floated ominously in the harbor, pushing the Azanian ships against the piers. They hadn't done anything yet and the lack of action irritated the soldier.

***How could so many ships enter the harbor without alerting the night watch?*** he wondered. This question echoed in the minds of most of the others, who were craning their necks to get a better view of the armada.

But another question haunted Mavindi's thoughts: what was the sha'a going to do?

The sha'a palace was a veritable anthill. In the throne room, the pensive sovereign sat on a seat of ebony, ivory and gold, while servants shuttled briskly between him and his ministers, advisers, who offered him an unbroken stream suggestions and proposals.

Leaning against the throne, the sha'a paid little heed to the verbal storm raging around him. In his mind, the ships blockading his harbor were the last clue to solving the riddle of events that had slowly unfolded over the previous months.

The spies the Sha'a had long infiltrated in all the other east coast kingdoms had reported an astonishing variety of disasters, from fires in Kilwa to snakes in Mpemba to civil war in Zanj. Under other circumstances, he would have taken advantage of this latest development, but now he saw it as part of a plan that frightened him.

The Sha'a had received nothing from his spies in Kitwana. He could only assume them dead. However, indirectly, he had heard of an invasion from the south – from Naama…

For the people of the east coast, Naama was more of a sensation than anything else – a sudden tightening of the stomach, an involuntary nervous throb and an inexplicable sick feeling. For hundreds of rains, contact between the east coast kingdoms and the Naama had been forbidden: not by official edict but by custom passed down through a hundred generations of ancestors.

Now Kitwana was conquered… by the Naama. The sha'a knew that the Naama would not stop there. South of the Naama was only a

sea ending in mountains of ice. To the north was all of the Nyumbani.

***No, the Naama won't stop in Kitwana,*** the sha'a mused as the councilors fought for him to hear them. ***And when the Naama moves, the Cush is sure to follow.***

If Azania had not been so handicapped by the unexpected uprising of the ***haramia,*** the sha'a would have faced both the Cushites and the Naama to defend his throne and the sovereignty of his kingdom. But the resurrection of Imaro, the leader of the bandits who had once been a bigger thorn in the side of the sha'a than it cared to admit, had led to a near fatal weakening of Azania. He knew his people couldn't repel an invasion from the south... or the north.

***Guess I should thank Mulengi that the Cushites are came first,*** concludes the sha'a. There was irony in his thoughts. "O mighty sha'a...

It was the voice of Jahi Mtumbe, the most listened to member of the Council of ***ufalme,*** people of high birth. The sha'a raised his head, coming out of his meditations. Mtumbe's voice died. The sha'a was a very old man, though he didn't fully realize it until the ***haramia attack was over.*** Her frail body was draped in a robe of dark red silk, imported from the country of the Hsing Nu, located far away on the other side of the Bahari Mashiriki.

Her face was surrounded by a crown made of interwoven gold and silver squares, which descended along her cheeks to wrap around her chin. The top of the crown bristled with innumerable needles, carved from the purest ivory, which rose about a foot above his head. On the part covering the chin hung an ***ndevu,*** a beard-like decoration woven with the long white hairs of the colobus monkey. The ***ndevu*** gave the sha'a the appearance of an old lion who had not yet abandoned his ascendancy, his pride.

"Enough," he said.

Sounds and movements ceased in the throne room. The ***ufalme,*** servants and guards remained silent, motionless, awaiting orders from their monarch.

Jua's rays filtered through tall, narrow windows and reflected off the gold ornaments of the ***ufalme,*** silver chain mail

guards and the intricate designs carved into the walls of the throne room. Even Jua seemed to be waiting impatiently for the sha'a's decision.

"I listened to you," he said. We have a choice: we can organize the defense against the invaders who are in our port, fight from house to house, from shop to shop, until the city burns around us.

But if the invaders had really wanted to invade us, they could have easily done so before dawn. That they didn't proves that the northern kingdoms don't want to make war on us. They are here to warn us... or perhaps to convince us to join their battle.

"I will go to the docks myself to learn what the kandisa wants from we.

Two ***ufalme*** spoke together. Jahi Mtumbe, a tall dressed man of dark blue silk, was the first to speak.

"O mighty sha'a, are you sure it is the kandisa who is here?" It could be a ruse, an illusion created by the ***jinns*** of the Outer Lands. Going to the docks, you might fall into a trap.

Another ***ufalme*** eagerly awaited the chance to speak. It was Mkojo, commander of the armies of Azania. Mkojo was in full armour; the sun cast a dazzling light from the polished steel and silver. It was he who had led the forces that had crushed the ***haramia*** of Imaro many rains before. Now he was the one blamed for the bandit leader's apparent resurrection. He had previously found no corpse matching the description he had been given of the barbarian. Yet he had supposed him dead. He was now paying the price for that supposition. "O mighty sha'a," said the commander. The invaders' ships are lined up very close to each other in the harbor. They cannot maneuver. They

have trapped themselves! By sending little flaming boats into their midst, we can disrupt them. By setting up the city's defenses, we will push them back. We can win this battle if we...

"Like you won the one against the ***haramia,"*** Mtumbe said. I am of course talking about the second, and also about your exploits against the ghost of N'tunje.

- Enough ! the sha'a said before Mkojo could formulate a fiery response.

The two ***ufalme*** closed their mouths. Their eyes continued to express the long-standing grudge between them.

The sha'a rose from his throne. The voluminous dress and the ivory-tipped crown enhanced her fragility. But his voice retained the edge of command.

- I took my decision. I will leave for the docks immediately. Mkojo, disperse the crowd. We don't want to trigger a panic. Only the soldiers and the ***ufalme*** will have to remain on the docks until I arrive.

Obediently, the commander nodded then began to bark orders at the guards. With a jingle of chainmail, the soldiers came out of the throne room.

"I want you to stay with me, Jahi, as always," the sha'a said to the other ***ufalme.***

Mtumbe nodded.

"O mighty sha'a," he said, as the servants hurriedly prepared the monarch's palanquin. Your thoughts are not entirely on the ships in port.

"You read me better than all my wives could, old man. friend, said the sha'a, looking up at Mtumbe.

"What else are you thinking about?"

“Believe it or not, I was thinking of Mavidogo, the ***mjimja.*** After all these rains, I still miss him sometimes. Still, I'm glad he's gone. This one would have sent me even sooner to the grave that awaits me.

"You will live forever, O mighty sha'a," said Mtumbe.

The sha'a just grinned as he waited for the palanquin.

On the deck of the ***Khaiyah,*** flagship of the Cushite fleet, four monarchs were holding council. The kandisa was there, wearing her white robe and winged crown. With him were the negus of Axum, ***the omal*** of Punt and the ***mbuli*** of Engaruku.

The negus was dressed as a soldier: leather armor encrusted with metal bumps and adorned with fringes made of lions' manes. He listened to others, but contributed very little to the conversation. Of the three allied kings, he was the most recalcitrant.

Like the negus, the omal of Punt was dressed for war. Puntian armor was more showy than that worn by the Axumites. The leather was dyed in many colors and the iron bands reinforcing it arranged in designs pleasing to the eye.

Although no longer very young, the omal had a face made childlike by large round eyes, characteristic of Puntians. Those eyes towered over a narrow, bronze-colored face. The omal listened attentively and spoke calmly, while the ***Khaiyah swayed*** smoothly over the harbor waters.

The mbuli was the high priest of the Engaruku, as well as its secular leader. Like the kandisa, he was dressed simply: a black cloak thrown over a tunic and breeches of the same color. He was the youngest of the four monarchs; as he listened to the kandisa and the others, his eyes remained fixed on a mystical plane.

Each sovereign was accompanied by a coterie of advisers.
Rakhma, the commander of the Cushite armies, stood behind the kandisa.
As always, his face was covered by a lion mask.

"I'm still not sure it was wise to give up sending
a messenger to the sha'a, said the omal.

The tone was courteous, but his disapproval obvious.

- Wait and see it coming! said Rakhma abruptly. His voice thundered through the mask as if he had acquired lion lungs.

"It is important that the sha'a come to us," said the kandisa, more calmly. If he is to join us, he must come freely.

"As freely as we are?" said the negus bitterly.

The kandisa looked at the Axumite. The negus looked away, ignoring the interested gazes of the omal and mbuli.

"Your will has been broken to spare you destruction," the kandisa told him. The Sha'a will understand this as well as you.

A Cushite sailor dressed in blue approached the portion of the bridge reserved for monarchs, seated under a large parasol.

— The Azanian soldiers are dispersing the crowd on the quays,
Ha-Nala, he said. Looks like they're preparing for the coming of the sha'a.

The kandisa rose from her chair, imitated by the other monarchs.

— We will learn if the rains of the sha'a have made him wise,
she whispered, looking over the ***Khaiyah's rail.***

Alone in his palanquin, the sha'a waited patiently for the kandisa to come to the docks. The eight slaves carrying it remained impassive, resigned, holding the canopy vehicle on their shoulders. They were ordered to hold the palanquin above the ground until the kandisa or her emissary appeared.

Apart from the hanging that hid the sha'a from view, Mtumbe and Mkojo showed much less patience than their monarch. The two ***ufalme eyed*** each other with undisguised antipathy. They had been rivals since childhood and neither had managed to get rid of the other.

Each side of the palanquin was flanked by a row of chain mail guards. Their dark faces were drenched in sweat. Although their shields and javelins were ready for immediate use, the sha'a told them he doubted their weapons would drink blood on this day.

Apart from the sha'a and its suite, the docks were deserted. Other soldiers formed a border of steel that held back a crowd reduced to the occasional cry of anger or frustration.

Abruptly the guards clutched their weapons tighter and the crowd fell silent. A great golden light rose above the ***Khaiyah ;*** a light that coalesced into a rising sphere as if to usurp the place of the sun in the sky.

With majestic slowness, she descended towards the quay. Raising their spears, the soldiers looked away from its brightness. The slaves holding the sha'a palanquin closed their eyes but moved no other muscles, as the golden sphere floated gently toward the salt-crusted timbers of the landing stage. The apparition moved in silence and despite all its light, gave off no heat.

Then the commander remembered that the sovereign had ordered no weapons to be used until a real threat was established. For now, the golden sphere was less threatening than mysterious.

“Lower your weapons,” Mkojo ordered.

The sphere landed lightly on the pier. Its surface was not solid. It flowed, swirled, like water in a maelstrom. She didn't seem to have any weight because the boards didn't creak at her touch.

The Azanians were so distracted by this spectacle that they forgot the armada in the port. Then the sphere disappeared and in its place stood the kandisa.

She was unarmed, and was dressed in the same unadorned white robe that she wore in the Sakkhar before absorbing the power of the

Cloud Surveyors. Its winged crown reflected the rays of the sun, sending them back into a million brilliant fragments. His golden eyes roamed the ranks of the soldiers who remained motionless, paralyzed by the force of his gaze.

She raised her hands. The slaves' fingers lost their steel grip on the arms of the palanquin. It left their shoulders and rose above their heads. As the bewitched Azanians watched with wide helpless eyes, the canopy vehicle floated through the air until it came to rest at the kandisa's feet.

The draperies quivered and then opened like the petals of a flower at sunrise. The sha'a appeared and looked at the one who possessed the power to deliver Azania from the threat of the Naama.

***But at what cost,*** he thought.

Aged, frail, belittled by the size of his crown and robe, the sha'a was further diminished by the presence of the woman in front of him.

Yet, watching the golden infernos that were his eyes, he felt invaded by a sudden vitality. It was as if he was regaining some of the nearly eighty rains that had fallen on his life.

He stood straighter in his dark red robe. Her face was no longer dominated by the ivory needles and ***ndevu*** of her crown. When he addressed the kandisa, his voice did not tremble.

“I'm glad you got to us before the Erriten.

The kandisa smiled and that smile banished the enchantment that had kept the other Azanians motionless. Weapons flew from numb arms; the soldiers faltered on legs that had become too weak to support their bodies. None fell.

"Will you join us?" the kandisa asked the sha'a, in a perfect kiswa.

The response from the ruler of Azania was instantaneous, unequivocal.

**16.**

**IS THIS THE CHOSEN ?**

To outsiders, Nalitali at first appeared to be a larger version of Kumbura, surrounded by an irregular granite wall three times the size of a man. However, when they approached, they saw that the city was actually made up of several smaller communities that shared the green valley protected by the wall and the imposing form of a fortress guarding the entrance. This was raised on a plateau of artificial rubble. The sun shone on the tips of the weapons of the soldiers occupying the towers which looked like truncated cones made of granite bricks.

Outside the walls, the ***mhuri*** of the poorer citizens were scattered like the toys abandoned by the children of a giant. Beyond the ***mhuri,*** in a wide plain stripped of its trees, a ***lwanzi,*** a fair, was in full swing. Msipo led the travelers towards the city, across the ***lwanzi.*** It was there that the people of Nalitali first saw the foreigners about whom so much had been said in such a short time.

The ***lwanzi*** was filled with merchants from all over Maguvurunde. They offered hundreds of different items, ranging from soapstone tableware from Amanyani to gold thread made by artisans from Ingomba-Ilede. Some sewed beads to form designs on the women's ***njobo ,*** under the demanding gaze of their clients. Cloth merchants presented rolls of cotton to the sagacity of fathers seeking a dowry for their daughters. Mercenaries tested the sharpness of the steel edge of the swords. House people argued with the meat vendors about the size of the raucously screeching guinea fowl. Soothsayers threw knucklebones, promising to reveal the future for a small fee. The hubbub of commerce floated on the ***lwanzi.***

Most people were natives of Maguvurunde, but there were also some Abamba. Unlike the slaves seen in the mines and on the road, these wore Maguvurunde clothes and spoke the local language. They circulated freely among the merchants.

Mapungubwe or Abamba, man or woman, slave or citizen, all those who were in the ***Iwanzi watched*** the progress of the travelers through the fair. Msipo was careful to maintain an impassive expression to mask the return of the sense of triumph that had already nestled deeper and deeper within him with each step that brought him closer to the city… and to the monomatapa.

Msipo then led the party between the ***mhuri*** just outside the city walls. The women and children living there watched the travelers pass in silence. Their men worked in the fields and gardens of the ***ndaus.*** Those in the background looked at the strangers in amazement, especially Pomphis and Imaro.

Arriving in front of the fortress, the travelers were stopped by the soldiers who were on guard that day. Although nearly ten rains had passed since Nalitali had been besieged by the armies of the monomatapa, the attitude of the guards was far from casual.

"Who is trying to enter Nalitali?" asked the chief.

" ***Mtekwa*** Msipo," said the commander. I have been here many times occasions; I'm surprised you don't recognize me.

The guard had no reaction to Msipo's pike.

“The monomatapa orders you to immediately take foreigners to ***the imba—*** to the palace. We will take care of them. Your men can rest in the barracks. Ten of mine will accompany you on ***the imba.***

Msipo nodded briefly. His rank was higher than that of the guard; he didn't like being told what to do by a subordinate.
However, given the importance of the news he was bringing to the monomatapa, he was willing to accept his attitude.

After relaying the received orders to the rest of the travellers, Msipo waited impatiently as each member of his group was meticulously identified and registered by another guard. He knew that all foreigners entering Nalitali had to have their names registered at the fortress. This practice was a holdover from the time when the kingdoms of Maguvurunde, at perpetual war, were infested with spies.

***You will soon have reason to remember these names,*** Msipo mused as the guards led the travelers' ***mbizi*** to the stables.

The travelers continued their journey on foot between the walls of the fortress. The ten soldiers to escort the foreigners to ***the imba*** were quiet but courteous. Their weapons remained sheathed.

Passing the enclosures of ***ndaus,*** merchants and craftsmen, travelers saw ***the imba*** in the distance, near the opposite side of the city walls. Like the fortress, ***the imba*** was an imposing construction, which dominated the city. Although they were still quite a distance away, they could clearly see the gigantic statue of the Thunderbird, perched atop the tallest tower in the city, watching over Nalitali like a stone guardian.

Crossing the city, Pomphis admired the construction of the surrounding walls. These were not intended for defense. Although they were made of stone, they gave off an impression of lightness, of casualness even. Rows of small multicolored bricks were laid in staggered rows. Most left gaps between each stone. The architecture was unlike anything the Bambuti had ever seen or studied. Her careful examination slightly changed the tormented course her thoughts had taken since Imaro's encounter with the slave-drivers.

Majnun's attention was drawn not to the walls of the enclosures but to the shape of ***the imba*** they were approaching. There he would meet the monarch who could help him retake Kitwana. The monomatapa would demand a price for such help… Majnun knew the customs of the monarchy better than many. But there were few things he would have refused to pay to drive the heel of the Naamas from his land...

Rabir felt the eyes of the people he met lingering on him long after his own had left them. The dark Mapungubwe and Abamba were, he knew, fascinated by his lighter skin. But it wasn't the looks that troubled the Zanjian. What gnawed at him like a rat in a sack of grain was the distance he had put between himself and the Bahari.

Never before had he been so far from the sea. Never before had he missed his movements, his rhythm so much.

The only waters near Nalitali were those of the Ukonsi River—almost nothing, to the mind of a man accustomed to the boundless expanse of the Bahari. Rabir felt he was closing in like a mollusk. He wouldn't laugh

never again seeing the frantic convulsions of a fish suddenly taken out of the sea.

Imaro's feelings were similar to Rabir's, but for different reasons. Despite his past rains in Cush, he still hated being locked up between walls. But today it wasn't Nalitali's that suffocated her. It was a bad feeling, almost a warning, like the ***kufahuma*** he had been taught as a child. It was like what he had felt when approaching the kandisa's palace for the first time.

The travelers soon reached the gates of ***the imba.*** From a distance the palace was impressive; up close, he inspired a kind of respect mingled with fear. Although smaller than that of the kandisa, it was nonetheless a building that reduced its inhabitants to insignificance. Composed of small granite bricks, ***the imba*** seemed monolithic, unified, a symbol of the will of the monomatapa.

Outside the gates, Msipo was greeted by a ***mtekwa,*** also Amanyani, his senior by many rains.

“Msipo,” the other ***mtekwa*** said enthusiastically. It's good to see you again. The monomatapa is waiting for you.

“Thank you Kokayi,” Msipo replied.

Kokayi was a senior ***mtekwa ,*** hence higher in rank than Msipo, but both were old friends and the older demanded no deference from the younger.

Kokayi led the strangers through a narrow, winding passage between two massive walls. This suddenly opened onto a large circular open-air courtyard. It was there that the monomatapa waited for foreigners from the east.

The main feature of the courtyard was a large pavilion consisting of a flattened cone roof, held up by slender poles of polished wood. The roof was of thick thatch. Engraved crocodiles crawled over the posts, up and down.

Beneath the roof was a large canopy made of whitewashed ***daga ,*** on which were painted designs resembling those adorning the ***mhuri*** of Kumbura. Several stools were placed on it, on which influential people who were part of the local ***ndaus sat .*** A second dais rose above the level of the first. On this were the

stools occupied by the monomatapa and his queen, whose title was dakamatapa.

Although the courtyard was guarded by soldiers in full armour, the foreigners were relieved of their weapons shortly after entering ***the imba.*** Some, including Imaro, had reluctantly surrendered their weapons. Now, however, everyone's attention was fixed on the man who had created an empire with the kingdoms of Maguvurunde.

The ***ndaus*** wore bright orange, yellow and scarlet coats; their heads were covered with ***chipete,*** helmets decorated with feathers, shells, and discs of gold and silver. Under Jua's shining gaze, they looked like birds trying to eclipse each other while preening their feathers.

The monomatapa, by contrast, wore only leopard skin around the loins. He had given up crowns and other ornaments. Although he had long since seen his fortieth rain fall, the only clues to his age were the white lines dotting his dark, woolly hair and beard.

His earth-colored skin was stretched tightly over a figure supporting the muscles of a giant. His face was that of a man in control of himself and his world.

Near the monomatapa sat a figure draped in beaded robes. The dakamatapa's head was covered with a cloth that fell to her shoulders. From the edge of it, a curtain of beads swayed. Not a single portion of the dakamatapa's body or face was covered with the insignia of her office.

The eyes of everyone present, native or foreign, shifted from monomatapa to Imaro. The resemblance between the Ilyassai and the Abamba people had been noticed long before. But no Abamba encountered by travelers resembled Imaro so much as the monomatapa. If their faces were different, their bodies could have been carved from the same stone by the same sculptor.

The monomatapa rose from his stool. Standing, he was even more impressive. He descended slightly from the canopy. When he saw Msipo, a genuinely warm smile curved his lips.

"I see you, my old friend," he said, his voice deep but not strong.

His obsidian eyes were penetrating but also capable of expressing humor or affection.

"I see you too," Msipo said. I come with strangers and a story.

He was happy to see his friend but thought it a shame that even after so much rain, the monomatapa was still able to disregard protocol. It was well worthy of an Abamba. Because he should logically have uttered several consecrated expressions before they address for good the reason for Msipo's arrival.

Understanding what Msipo meant, the monomatapa took a step back and adopted a formal expression.

'Yes,' he said. Many stories have been circulating lately, Msipo, including some you haven't heard yet. But we will hear first of all that of those foreigners who have come from so far away to see us.

Without raising his voice, the monomatapa ordered stools to be brought into the yard for the strangers. The servants standing around the edge of the large stone circle disappeared for a moment and returned carrying enough stools for all the strangers and Msipo to sit on.

Once again, Chukumba was obliged to act as interpreter. This time he was aided by Pomphis, who had acquired a working, if not eloquent, knowledge of the language of Maguvurunde.

Msipo introduced each of the strangers to the monomatapa. The monarch's eyes widened slightly when he heard the word "Ilyassai" associated with Imaro, but his confusion was only momentary.

Then Chukumba and Pomphis told a story they had often told. From time to time, the ***ndaus*** shook their heads, showing obvious disbelief. During the passages featuring Imaro, the monomatapa cast pensive glances at the Ilyassai. At no time during the narration did the dakamatapa speak or move.

It was as if a sculpted effigy was on the stool placed next to that of the monomatapa...

When the story was finished, a short thoughtful silence ensued. Then the monomatapa spoke, as if thinking aloud.

“The Naama… They have been stopped for so long by the Abamba Highlands, like animals by a fire. But now the animals have found the courage to leap through the flames to swoop down on those who thought they were safe behind them.

He looked at Msipo, then at the ***ndaus.*** The latter suddenly seemed unwell comfortable on their stools.

"You see," the monomatapa told them. I was right. I knew there had to be a reason the Highlands were shaking like a cow about to calve. I knew these weren't just 'tribal wars'.

Some of the ***ndaus*** couldn't meet his gaze. Even after ten rains, there were those who were irritated at being commanded by an Abamba…

The monomatapa then turned his attention back to Imaro.

“The echo of your actions has gone before you, warrior. You broke a man's arm on the road today. Do you always use your strength on those who are weaker than you?

Imaro understood part of what the monomatapa was saying. Chukumba translated the rest. The Ilyassai replied in a brusque tone.

— This man was whipping another who was unarmed, defenceless. What I did to her was no worse than that.

Once again the monomatapa stood up and motioned for Imaro to follow suit. A sudden tension shot through the yard, like the crackle of lightning in a clear sky.

The two giants faced each other like bulls ready to fight to dominate a herd. A wave of anxiety ran through the assembly in the courtyard. Only the monomatapa and Imaro remained calm.

"Let's see if you can really call yourself strong, warrior!" said the monomatapa.

Understanding the words of the monarch, Pomphis turned sharply to Msipo.

- What is he going to do ? he asked.

“A contest,” Msipo replied. The monomatapa likes to measure its strength with those who seem to challenge him. He has never lost such a contest.

The monomatapa motioned for Imaro to approach a block of granite near the throne canopy. It was an ordinary, undecorated stone that reached their waists and that no one had noticed before. On both sides, the edge of the block bore red-brown streaks—dried blood.

The monomatapa knelt on one side of the stone and rested his elbow on the surface. On the other side, Imaro followed suit. He didn't need Chukumba to translate the monarch's instructions; he knew the game they were going to play, a game that was already old before the construction of Nalitali.

The two men held hands firmly. Their eyes met and never left each other… eyes that seemed to have been cast in the same mold. But those of the monomatapa were full of self-confidence. Imaro's bore the shadow of old wounds...

— ***Now!*** shouted the monomatapa, launching the full power of his back and shoulders against Imaro's arm, forcing him down.

When the back of Imaro's hand touched the stone, the game would end and the Ilyassai would be the loser.

Imaro's hand descended to within millimeters of the granite surface. The monomatapa was stronger than any human he had encountered before. But not enough to make Imaro's hand travel the path that separated her from the stone.

The Ilyassai bandaged his arm, giving it the rigidity of iron. Then he began to exert the full measure of his own strength and the arm of the monomatapa began to rise. Imaro's task was not easy. His elbow rubbed on the granite; he felt the blood flowing from the torn skin.

The monomatapa pursed his lips, struggling to stop the inexorable advance of Imaro's arm. His efforts were in vain. Once more the arms of the two men were perpendicular to the surface of the stone.

Then Imaro began to lower the arm of the monomatapa. The older man's eyes were defiant but in that bravado lay acceptance of Imaro's superior strength. Yet the monomatapa refused to admit defeat. He growled and struggled to keep his arm from dropping lower.

Within moments, however, his hand was close to rubbing against the stone. One last effort and Imaro would win the contest.

He didn't make that effort. An unreadable expression in his eyes, he eased the pressure he was exerting on the monomatapa a little, allowing him to raise his arm until both of their fists were turned skyward again.

Then his arm became rigid again and the monomatapa could not move him further. Both men's back muscles were tense like blocks of stone but the stalemate was not to be broken.

"Why don't you beat me, warrior?" then said the monomatapa. You know you can.

Imaro's mouth opened in astonishment: the monarch's words did not need to be translated. It was Ilyassai, the language

Imaro's kindergarten; ilyassai with a slight accent but ilyassai all the same.

At that moment the monomatapa could have forced Imaro's hand against the stone in a single supreme effort, but he did not. Instead, he waited for the wide-eyed stranger to answer his question.

"I can beat you," Imaro said in Ilyassai. But I don't want it. At these

words, the monomatapa freed his hand from Imaro's embrace and leapt to his feet. His guards took out their weapons; they had not understood the exchange of words between the two giants and were ready to defend their sovereign if Imaro endangered him.

Imaro also stood up, his body tense like that of a lion ready to pounce. He felt that his life would soon be irrevocably altered. And it had happened to him too often in the past…

The monomatapa looked towards the dakamatapa who had remained motionless throughout the meeting.

- Is the one ? asked the monarch.

The woman rose from her stool, responding to her husband's almost plaintive expression of hope. She removed the cloth that covered her head and got rid of a gesture of the dresses embroidered with pearls. As the clothes fell off, she climbed down from the dais and walked towards Imaro.

He felt rooted to the ground. His eyes were wide open, his mouth hanging open in an expression of disbelief. He knew the dakamatapa's face, although he hadn't seen it for more than twenty rains. He knew that slender, mahogany-skinned body, clad only in a short tunic covering it from chest to thigh. Age had hardly affected her since he had seen her leave the ***manyattas*** of the Ilyassai, leaving him alone to face the future among a people who despised him.

He had often tried to forget her, but he knew her name.

Cross.

His mother.

"Yes, he is our son," said Katisa, turning to the monomatapa, who swayed beside the warrior, waiting for an answer.

In shock, Imaro's universe turned gray. His knees shook with unusual weakness. He only saw the monomatapa and Katisa as dark silhouettes against an indistinct background. Old wounds opened like a crackle of sparks. He used what strength he had left to stay on his feet.

Then he felt the monomatapa's arms wrap around him. And the monarch spoke to him, in a voice broken by irrepressible waves of emotion.

"Oh my son," he said sadly. She wouldn't even tell me your name. She only said that you would find us one day...

And the ruler of all Maguvurunde bowed his head to weep over Imaro's shoulder.

## INTERLUDE

*The Abamba Highlands were streaming with blood. The* mfecane *– the hour of crushing – had arrived. To the south, the Tsubi massacred the herds and burned the fields of neighboring tribes, prompted by the visions of Nongkwaze. They plundered shamelessly, exulting in the knowledge that the gods would soon descend from the heavens to replace u*

*The other tribes defended themselves with the fury of despair but the Tsubi seemed invincible. Soon famine crossed the hills of the South on its spectral feet. The Tsubi themselves didn't seem to need food. Bright-eyed apparitions, they fell with the torch and the spear on all the villages, one after the other. And the fugitives began to cross Zimbazi, surging into the lands of Maguvurunde.*

*The* mfecane… *The crush.*

*To the east, a mighty* nkosi *had risen like a giant from wake up. He was now on his feet and the others trembled under his shadow. The name of the* nkosi *was Shingane; Crazy Shingane; Shingan the Terrible; Shingane the Great Elephant.*

*With the speed of fire spreading through tall, dry grass, Shingane had adorned himself with the title of* nkosi *of the Mtatwa, an insignificant eastern tribe. He taught them new methods of warfare; new meanings to the word cruelty. Mtatwa warriors soon came to worship Shingane as a god, while women feared him as much as a demon. But the women dared not express their presentiments, for fear of being declared witches by the* isangoma, *the witch-sniffers of Shingane.*

*Ruthlessly, efficiently, the Mtatwa conquered their neighbors. The young people of the vanquished tribes were enrolled in the* impis *of Shingane, his regiments of warriors. The young women were taken*

*as wives to replace the mtatwa women denounced by the isangoma. All the others were killed.*

*Shingane's bloody empire stretched across the eastern Highlands while the terror sown by the Tsubi dominated its south and west. The Highlands were in turmoil and no tribe trusted neighboring tribes.*

*The* mfecane… *The crush…*

*Only one tribe in the Highlands remained immune to* mfecane; *the Ngwika, the tribe that saw the birth of the man who had become monomatap The Ngwika were allies of the empire, so neither the Tsubi nor the Mtatwa dared attack them.*

*But the Ngwika were just an island of reason in a sea of sudden chaos. Sooner or later the* mfecane *would reach them. And their nkosi was far away, seated on three thrones, on the other side of the Zimbazi. The monomatapa was the only man capable of leading the* impis *of the Ngwika against the Tsubi and the Mtatwa. But the monomatapa no longer be*

*The* mfecane… *The crush…*

*Bohu's face turned to Nongkwaze, as she gazed into the Wankuza pool, waiting for new visions.*

*And Bohu's voice whispered dreams of conquest, greatness and bloodshed in Shingane's ear.*

*The* mfecane… *The crush…*

## 17.
# OTHER REVELATIONS

Within moments the monomatapa's court went from complete silence to utter confusion. The actions of the monarch and his queen seemed inexplicable. Seeing the monomatapa kiss the stranger from the east caused the ***ndaus*** to exchange uncertain glances. The strange language he spoke amazed them.

Only Pomphis understood the meaning of the events that had just unfolded, because he spoke Ilyassai. When he heard the words of the monomatapa and Katisa, Pomphis thought he had finally learned the answer to the riddle that was Imaro. But another answer was yet to come…

Imaro suddenly pushed the monomatapa away from him. His father staggered back and nearly fell before regaining his balance as easily as he could have done.

A pained expression clouded the monomatapa's face as he watched Imaro, but he didn't return his gaze. Her burning eyes were fixed on Katisa who hadn't approached since revealing her identity to her son.

When she had left Imaro in the ***Ilyassai*** manyattas twenty rains earlier, Katisa had not looked back. She hadn't looked back because she knew what she would see: the face that faced her today. The face of a child who suffers...

Imaro's voice thundered like the roar of Ngatun the lion, echoing off the walls of ***the imba.*** A single word came from her twisted mouth, a word that hit Katisa like a blow, though she knew she had to hear it someday.

- Why ? Imaro questioned with a man's voice but the emotions of an abandoned child watching his mother, very upright, striding away from his life.

In a belated reaction the guards interposed themselves between the mother and the son. A thicket of spears threatened Imaro but the leonine gleam shone in his gaze and the soldiers blinked nervously under the brim of their helmets. The warrior's hands opened and closed without his being aware of it, as if he were tearing an invisible object.

“Imaro,” Katisa said calmly. I told the Ilyassai that I was leaving a warrior behind me. Am I mistaken?

Imaro glared at him harder than the tips of spears. His head wasn't just filled with blood, bones and brains. He had just elucidated the two mysteries that had obsessed him all his life. But these answers were not enough. One question remained; the one he had yelled moments before. He knew what he had to say to get more answers.

“I've been through ***the olmaiyo,*** ” Imaro said, referring to the traditional lion hunt that's the Ilyassai's rite of passage to adulthood. I killed Ngatun. I am a warrior.

His words were marked with a combination of pride and bitterness. Understanding the two, Katisa lowered her eyes for a moment, then looked back into her son's.

"That's good," she said.

“It's not thanks to you.

It was then that the monomatapa manifested its presence again. Pushing the guards angrily, he made them lower their spears.

"Don't point guns at my son!" he shouted. Return to your posts and stay there until I tell you otherwise.

The guards hastened to obey. ***His son ?*** they thought in disbelief. But they did not allow amazement to show on their faces.

Once again the space between Imaro and Katisa was empty. This time, yet, the monomatapa stood by his queen's side.

“My son,” the monomatapa began hesitantly. I knew Katisa was carrying a child when she left Amanyani. Deep in my heart, I knew she would come back to me one day, with this child. She came back… alone. When she told me she left you with her people, I was furious.

When she told me why she did it, I became sad… for you. She didn't tell me anything about you, not even your name. She said it would be better that way. But she also said that you would come to us when you were a man, that I would recognize you.

“You are here now… and I recognize you.

The monomatapa had put an arm around Katisa's waist as if he needed support. Her face was still shining with tears.

His voice almost broke when he spoke again.

“Katisa told me what would happen to you at the Ilyassai. She explained to me why I shouldn't send an army to the Tamburure to snatch you from them. When she explains to you, you will understand. But don't blame me, my son. Please… don't blame me…

Imaro watched the monomatapa's face, a face that looked more like his own with every passing second. He saw the vibrant plea in her eyes.

***His father…*** He was no longer the “son of no father” as with the Ilyassai. But the word "father" was choking in his throat; he couldn't pronounce it.

"I don't blame you," he said finally. But I need answers.

A broad smile lit up the monomatapa's face. For a moment he seemed ready to kiss Imaro again. But he changed his mind and his arm remained around Katisa.

"You will have your answers, my son," he said. I promise you.

But Imaro was looking at his mother, not his father. Katisa stared back at him without batting an eyelid. She had known for a long time that she would have to settle accounts with Imaro; and that this settlement would not be easy.

Jua the sun had set; Mwesu the moon was in the center of a black velvet sky. The ***imba's*** courtyard was illuminated by a dozen lights.

And Katisa continued to talk.

Only Imaro, Katisa and the monomatapa remained there. Pomphis, Rabir and Majnun had not left heartily, but the monomatapa had insisted that Katisa's story be heard only through his son's ears.

And by hers: much of what she was about to say was unknown to her.

Katisa had spoken of her first exile, far from the Ilyassai. Both Imaro and her father knew that she had fled to escape the attentions of Chitendu, a wizard who sold his soul to the Mashataan. But during the five rains she had spent with the young Imaro, at the Ilyassai, Katisa had never told her where she had been, nor what had happened to her.

She had walked south.

Beyond the Tamburure was a hidden land, called Ardhi-ya Nyama - the land of beasts. Katisa had been there, seeking an Ilyassai clan that had migrated from Tamburure when the grandmother's grandmother's grandmother of the oldest woman in the village was still a child.

Katisa had never found the lost ilyassai clan. But she had discovered herds of animals the likes of which did not exist anywhere else, within the Nyumbani.

There were sheep bigger than buffaloes there, with horns resembling the tusks of an elephant. There were rhinos there that made those who lived in the Tamburure look small. There were elephants with jaws adorned with four tusks, antelopes with skulls adorned with six horns.

And there were predators: lions almost twice the size of those killed by young Ilyassai to prove they were human; hyenas even bigger than lions; big cats with teeth protruding from their mouths like swords; and, worst of all, giant baboons, hunting in flocks, who could take down the largest of herbivores.

Yet, despite all the dangers presented by the gigantic animals of this land forgotten by time, Katisa had crossed the Ardhi-ya-Nyama without incident. In the weeks she had roamed its seemingly endless reaches, she had not encountered another human being.

It was only by overcoming the cliffs on the southern flank of the Ardhi-ya-Nyama that Katisa had come into contact with her own race. The northern border of Maguvurunde rested on these gigantic rock masses. There, Katisa had been captured by slavers from Amanyani.

Imaro allowed himself an empathetic nod at this point in his mother's narration. He understood well the hatred that an Ilyassai could have for a single moment of bonding.

Katisa hadn't been a slave for long. After escaping from the compound of the ***ndau*** who had bought her, she had joined a band of ***mpunia,*** thieves and outlaws who raided caravans all over Maguvurunde. Katisa had quickly become one of their leaders, earning the title "dakamatapa ***mpunia*** ", Queen of Thieves.

— I was almost a slave before becoming leader of the ***haramia,*** bandits east coast," Imaro said, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"Your blood runs through his veins with force, Katisa," said the monomatapa.

“Yours too,” she replied.

An enigmatic smile briefly crossed his lips and then disappeared.

Katisa and the other ***mpunia*** of his band had been captured by the Amanyani soldiers. An ***Mpunia*** traitor had sold his comrades for gold offered by the army, which had found itself unable to reduce Katisa's forces by any other means.

Imaro felt the hair at the back of his neck tingle. Katisa could very well have been describing how her own band of outlaws were sold to the combined forces of Azania and Zanj.

Most of the ***mpunia*** had been condemned and executed. An even worse fate had been in store for Katisa, the stranger with strange features and manners. She was to become a slave to a slave…

Two rains before Katisa arrived in Maguvurunde, slavers operating in the Abamba Highlands had taken away a ***nkosi*** from the Ngwika tribe. His name was Mkwayo. A fearsome warrior who slaughtered dozens of Amanyani soldiers before being captured, he was to become ***muruwi,*** a fighter engaging in public jousting to entertain the Amanyani crowds.

The life of a ***muruwi*** was generally short. Most were Abamba slaves, the others Amanyani entering the arena for gold and excitement. Champions emerged only to be beaten by others before the end of the next moon.

But Mkwayo had survived, vanquishing all who came against him.
Its owner, an important ***ndau,*** had won a ***mhuri*** filled with gold by betting on the prowess of the Abamba warrior. Mkwayo had not seen the color of this gold. But he was now known throughout the Amanyani as "monomatapa ***muruwi*** ", King of Fighters.

Imaro felt another tingle at the base of his neck. Mkwayo's fame as a ***muruwi*** was tantamount to his own triumph during the Hakht, the Cush...

From time to time, Mkwayo's owner would give him a slave girl for fun. The ***muruwi*** treated them almost as brutally as he fought in the arena. His hatred of the Amanyani was the fuel fueling the flame of his life.

Katisa had been given to Mkwayo by order of the monomatapa, who appreciated the exploits of the champion. The ***ndaus*** had amused themselves with the irony of the fate of the dakamatapa ***mpunia.*** The Queen of Thieves and the King of Fighters, great team! they joked. Like jackals, the ***ndaus*** and their followers had assembled outside the squalid but well-guarded ***mhuri*** that housed the arena fighters.

But the ***ndaus*** hadn't heard the screams and blows they expected. None of them had thought that Katisa and Mkwayo were going to find love together...

“So that's your name… Mkwayo,” Imaro said, looking at the monomatapa.

- Yes. But only my family members use it now that I am monomatapa.

There was a question in Imaro's eyes, a silent question.

***How could a foreigner doubled as a slave rise to rule three kingdoms?***

"That's another story," Mkwayo said, reading his eyes. For Right now, what's most important to you is what Katisa has to say.

Imaro nodded slightly. A barely marked fold dug the forehead of the monomatapa.

Katisa had remained Mkwayo's companion in her ***mhuri.*** She had never forgotten her ilyassai lover whose death Chitendu had caused during ***the olmaiyo,*** but her love for Mkwayo was real.

During half a rain, the two strangers had lived, eaten and slept together. If Katisa and Mkwayo had not been slaves, this time could have been idyllic. They fought together in the arena. His knowledge of ilyassai fighting techniques allowed Katisa to bravely oppose the ***abamba*** and amanyani muruwi. The dakamatapa ***mpunia*** had become the dakamatapa ***muruwi…***

Then Katisa found out that she was expecting a child.

Along with Mkwayo, she had begun making plans for their escape, neither she nor he desiring their child to be born in captivity.

Their plan was simple, daring… and had to end in failure. Katisa had finally found herself carried away from the walls of the Amanyani, on the back of a ***mbizi*** she could not control, while Mkwayo fought an ever-growing horde of soldiers who tried to bring her down. More than seven rains had passed before she saw him again.

"Now I'm going to teach you what I hid from you during all these rains, Mkwayo," she said to the monomatapa. This ***mbizi*** almost carried me out of Maguvurunde before I learned to control it, she continued for Imaro. It was just as well. His actions probably confused my pursuers more than me...

Katisa's flight had ended in Mahali-ya-Kiu, the Land of Thirst—a desert marking the western boundary of the Amanyani. There had died the ***mbizi*** that Katisa rode. And she herself had almost suffered the same fate.

She had been discovered by a group of Twa-si, the little yellow people living in the Mahali-ya-Kiu. The Twa-si had saved Katisa and her unborn child. Naming her "she-who-came-with-the-wind", the peaceful hunters - related to the Naama but not possessing the taste for power and corruption of their cousins - had taught Katisa to live in the desert. . She had come to love them, despite their customs being so different from those of the warlike Ilyassai.

“You were born in the Mahali-ya-Kiu,” Katisa said to Imaro. But some something happened before you were born.

The day had come when the Twa-si had taken Katisa, shortly before her delivery, to a place dedicated to Mantis, their greatest god. They had left her there alone. Although she mastered their strange, snapping language correctly, she hadn't understood the reasons why they had abandoned her.

She knew it very quickly.

“A god came to see me that night,” Katisa said, her voice full of respect. But it wasn't Mantis. It was one of the Cloud Striders, descended through an opening in the sky. He was bigger than an elephant and his body looked like the night itself: black dotted with lights like stars. For a moment, a single moment, it solidified and the earth shook under its weight...

The Cloud Strider had become intangible. It enveloped Katisa like a warm puff of wind. She had felt him entering her through every pore of her skin. They had become one. Inside Katisa had felt great changes,

and more so in the child she was carrying. Knowledge had surged in his mind. She had learned who her son was to be, what she had to do to ensure that he fulfilled his destiny. And she had rebelled against

that knowledge even as the Cloud Strider left her and recrossed the gap in the sky.

The breach had closed. When she had disappeared, an indescribable shiver of fear had passed through Katisa, as if ***something*** had witnessed the visit of the Cloud Strider. That ***something was*** screaming in rage at what he had seen and the scream had filled Katisa's mind until she thought her head was ready to implode. Suddenly appeared Mantis, a half-man, half-insect being. When the Twa-si god came, the dark presence that had frightened her so much had retreated.
Mantis had comforted Katisa with words that would stay with her for the rest of her life: ***Sometimes the gods of earth and sky unite, and the Mashataan can do nothing about it...***

As those words echoed in her mind, Katisa lost consciousness. When she awoke, the sun was rising from the sky and her Twa-si friends had found her. She had told them nothing of what had happened in the sacred place. Her intuition told her that they knew, as they had known she was coming. She was sure they also knew she had to leave them.

Less than two months later, Imaro was born.

"The Ilyassai called you 'son of no father,' Imaro," Katisa said.
Now you know you are the son of ***two*** fathers. The seed of Mkwayo created you; the power of the Cloud Strider has shaped you. As the oldest son of the monomatapa, you are the ***benematapa,*** the heir of all Maguvurunde. As the son of a Cloud Strider, you are more than you ever thought you were...

Imaro watched his mother silently. His mind dated back to the day he had freed the minds of the leaders of the Watu-wa-Kwanza, the First People, from the bodies in which the Mashataan had imprisoned them, bodies made of half flesh and half stone. Before leaving, the spirits of these leaders had called Imaro "brother". And the oldest Nyumbani legend was that the Watu-wa-Kwanza were spawned by the Cloud Striders...

Imaro now knew who he was. But this knowledge did not comfort him. She only brought up new questions. He still needed answers.

"Why did you leave me with the Ilyassai?" he asked. And why didn't you tell me all this before leaving?

Katisa knew then that the moment of reckoning had arrived.

# 18.
# **THE LIGHTNING** BIRD

As in Kumbura, the foreigners spent the night in the compounds of the inhabitants of Nalitali. As the moon moved slowly among scattered rows of stars, only a few townspeople succumbed to the insistent call of sleep. Rumors buzzed like mosquitoes, from enclosure to enclosure, multiplying and deviating a little more from the truth with each narration.

***One of the foreigners is the son of the monomatapa…***
***He looks like an Abamba, but isn't one...***
***He broke the monomatapa's arm and the monomatapa kissed him...***
***The dakamatapa is his mother…***
***Isn't the dakamatapa sterile?***
***Foreigners want the monomatapa to guide us against the Naama…***
***The Naama and the Abamba will join forces to destroy us...***
***The mothers of the monomatapa's other sons will tear the empire apart when they will learn that this foreigner is the benematapa…***

The discussions continued until the moon touched the horizon.
Nalitali had already undergone a transformation when its people learned that they were ruled by an Abamba. Today with the news of the Naama uprising and the revelation of the discovery of a new son for the monomatapa, it became clear that the future of Maguvurunde was about to change…

Rabir, Pomphis, Majnun and Msipo spent the night within the compound of the ***mtekwa*** Kokayi. Chukumba, whose talent as an interpreter was always needed, was with them. They were talking about what they had seen and heard in ***the imba.***

"I can't believe Imaro is the son of a king," Rabir said, shaking his bald head. And I'm not sure he believes it himself.

"He will believe it," said Pomphis.

"What did you and your kandisa know about all this before you came here?" Msipo asked, looking at the Bambuti. And if you knew, why didn't you warn your warrior friend before? Pomphis calmly met the ***mtekwa's gaze.***

“The kandisa knows a lot about the past, present and future.
But she only knows generalities, not specifics. She knew Imaro was more than he thought he was. She knew he would have to play a role in readjusting the ***bedside.*** But what that role would be and who Imaro was, or what he was, even the kandisa couldn't know. Imaro's wife and child were murdered before it became clear that Imaro and Bohu were in opposition. Maybe you ***mtekwa*** can tell me what would have been beneficial for Imaro from what I know.

Msipo didn't answer Pomphis' implied question. ***His tongue has needs to be shortened,*** he thought darkly.

"In the ***bure,*** I understood that Imaro was born to be a leader," said Majnun. Without him we would have been massacred by the ***izingogo.*** Now he has found his heritage. But… I wonder if he wants it.

- Why do you say that ? asked Rabir.

'I think he's a man in conflict with himself.

Pomphis decided it was time to change the subject.

“ ***Mtekwa,*** ” he said to Msipo. We still find it unusual that an outsider from a people who have been your age-old enemy could take the throne, not only of Amanyani, but also of Inyanga and Mapungubwe. How did he get there?

Msipo didn't hesitate before answering.

“He went to Dhlo-Dhlo and found the Thunderbird…

"If I had had the choice, we would have stayed with the Twa-si," said Katisa. I have never met a friendlier, more generous people. But I had no choice.

- Why that ? Imaro asked.

“ ***Think a little,*** Imaro! Katisa exclaimed, out of patience. Do you think it was chance that it was me who discovered the Cloud Strider in the middle of a desert? Your birth was determined by forces beyond our understanding. There's a reason for everything that's happened to you since I left the ***manyattas.***
The Cloud Striders planted a weapon in me, and that weapon had to be forged, and sharpened...

Before leaving his body, the Cloud Walker had opened for Katisa the doors of knowledge and wisdom in his mind. This openness had allowed her to accept what she had to do about her unborn child.

***You have been changed,*** the Cloud Strider had said within her. ***You will age more slowly than the others, but you will never bear a child again. Your son will be different. He will be strong; with him other men will be like children. But this strength will have to be honed in adver For he will be our weapon in the battle that will determine whether or not Nyumbani falls into the hands of the Mashataan. They themselves will own one, similar to him. Your son will have to be prepared to face it. Only your people can teach him the things he needs to awaken the potential I have placed in him.***

Katisa had admitted the veracity of this last assertion. She knew no greater warriors than the Ilyassai. But the Cloud Strider still had things to say...

***He must arrive among them as an adult,*** alone. ***You have to leave it.***

***Nope !*** Katisa's protest had come from deep within.

***He must learn to hate before he learns to love, the Cloud Strider had continued inexorably. He must learn to master the power of his anger before tempering it with compassion. He must learn to use pain as a source of strength. If you stay with him, he'll never learn those lessons.***

***Nope !*** Katisa shouted again. She had already lost Mkwayo. She would not lose her child.

So the Cloud Strider had filled his mind with visions of what the Nyumbani would be like if the Mashataan prevailed in a struggle that would not come until many rains later. Katisa had screamed, closing her eyes to what she was seeing. But she couldn't close her mind. The images were terrifying, and the thought that she might be responsible filled her with a sense of guilt.

" ***Is that what will happen if I don't abandon my child?"***

“ ***I can't say for sure. But it's most likely.***

" ***And after I leave him… what will happen?" Where will I go? And there is something else. The Ilyassai will never accept a child whose father is not an Ilyassai. They would kill us both. And Chitendu will always be there…***

" ***I'll give you a talisman that will drive Chitendu away from the Ilyassai." In return they will allow your son to remain among them. But you will have to go.***

" ***Where?"***

" ***You will return to Amanyani. Mkwayo is not dead. He will be waiting for you in the city. And he won't be the same man.***

These and other words spoken by the Cloud Strider had remained with Katisa long after Imaro's birth. She had called him 'Imaro', the ilyassai word for 'strength', because that was what he would need to survive. She had waited before leaving the Twa-si until her son had become strong enough to endure the long journey from Mahali ya-Kiu to Tamburure.

The Cloud Strider had been right about Imaro's vitality. In less than three months, he was ready to endure the rigors of a march that would not end until he was old enough to walk and speak his first words.

A group of Twa-si had accompanied her on her journey, though their ancestors had been driven from the desert many rains before by larger, more warlike tribes. Yet they knew well the vast expanses they crossed, as if they had traveled up and down the Nyumbani in a dream.

***We have been here before,*** they said to Katisa when she asked them to explain the riddle of their knowledge.

They had guided her through the Kovango swamps and the Kerinyagga mountains. To the east of the mountains, the plain of Tamburure unrolled like a vast yellow carpet.

Katisa was finally home.

The Twa-si had stayed with her and Imaro until they reached the territory claimed by the Ilyassai. There, the little yellow hunters had bid farewell to Katisa. Each of them had kissed her before disappearing like a ghost in the tall grass.

Imaro knew how Katisa had used the Cloud Strider's talismans to reveal Chitendu's true nature and exile him from the ***manyattas.*** It was one of the few things she had told him about her past during the five rains she had lived with him.

He then told her what she could not know.

“Chitendu is dead. I killed him, in Stone Village.

The firelight reflected the fiery pride in Katisa's eyes as Imaro recounted the first blow he had struck at the Erriten. But pride quickly turned to grief when he told her how Chitendu had bewitched the Ilyassai, making them believe that he had fled from Ngatun during his ***olmaiyo.*** When the Ilyassai understood that they had been deceived, it was too late. Imaro had gone into exile, like Katisa before him.

Katisa picked up the thread of her story, unwinding it hastily as if she meant something else when it was finished.

She believed the Cloud Walker's words and traveled south again, crossing the Ardhi-ya-Nyama. The Strider had told her she would find Mkwayo alive, but he hadn't said where.

When she had emerged from the Ardhi-ya-Nyama, entering the far north of the Amanyani, she had been captured again, this time by Amanyani soldiers. She had been brought to the court of the monomatapa, in Mji Amanyani, the capital of the kingdom. And the monomatapa was Mkwayo…

"I have one more thing to tell you, Imaro," Katisa said in a strangled voice. The Cloud Strider told me I had to leave you when the Ilyassai promised not to kill you. But I wanted to stay with you until you were old enough to begin your warrior training. I wanted to remember you and I wanted you to remember me. It was a mistake.

I had to silence my love for you so that you would be strong enough to face the life the Ilyassai would force you to endure. I should have listened to the Cloud Strider, Imaro. But I could not. I would never have left you there without what he, your other father, showed me.

Katisa was crying.

“When I left, I knew how you would remember me.
I knew you would come to hate me. If so, it's my fault. But you must know that I acted out of love for you, even if I was wrong to act as I did.

Suddenly she stood up and crossed the few nocturnal steps that separated her from Imaro. She wrapped her arms around the warrior's shoulders, pressing her face against the powerful chest. Her body was swept away by a storm of sadness that she had locked up in her soul for twenty rains.

During this moment Imaro did not move a muscle. Her arms remained at her side. His body was rigid as if it had been stone and not flesh. He

do not say anything.

Katisa pulled away and looked deeply, hopefully, deep into Imaro's eyes. And found nothing there.

Letting out a stifled moan of despair, she pulled away from the warrior and blindly ran out of the yard, disappearing into the darkness. Only the monomatapa and Imaro remained here.

Mkwayo had remained silent during Katisa's story, as many elements were unknown to him. When she had returned to him, many rains before, she had only told him that she had given birth to a son and had left him among her people. And she had told him why. But she hadn't told him her son's name. And she had almost forcibly prevented him from going to fetch him from Tamburure. He had granted her wishes because he believed in the vision of the Cloud Walker.

He had had his own vision; by listening to it he had become a monomatapa.

Mkwayo rose from his stool and approached Imaro. his fists were tight; for a moment he seemed about to strike the Ilyassai.

"You don't know what that woman went through because of you," he said through gritted teeth. Every day she wondered whether or not you were alive.
The Cloud Strider had told her she would see you again, but she couldn't be sure. She prayed to her gods, mine and those of Maguvurunde that you fulfill your destiny and become what you were meant to be.
His greatest desire was to see you, to learn if the Cloud Striders were right about you. It was also my wish. Now
we saw.

He looked down at his son. The firelight lit up the contemptuous grin that twisted his features.

"I thought you would be a man," Mkwayo said.

Then he turned on his heels and strode out of the yard, leaving Imaro alone under a sky from which a rain of stars was falling.

"Dhlo-Dhlo?" repeated Pomphis. The Lightning Bird? I don't know of
what are you talking about, ***mtekwa.***

“You admit you don't know something,” Msipo said with exaggerated surprise. It's unusual. I will enlighten you. The Thunderbird is the symbol of the Chezwi, the people who first occupied Maguvurunde thousands of rains ago. It is a bird that moves so fast that lightning follows it across the sky. During hundreds of rains, the Maguvurunde was

united by the Chezwi who reigned in their capital of Dhlo-Dhlo. And the Lightning Bird always flew over their king's head when needed.

As the rains passed, the Chezwi fell into decadence, and wallowed in perversion. They waged war on neighboring kingdoms and attacked the Abamba tribes to the south, forgetting the virtues of their ancestors. They abandoned their old gods in favor of false deities.

A horde of invaders then swept from the north, the Gyosi, a barbaric people who, like a cloud of locusts, destroyed everything in their path. When the Chezwi called the Thunderbird for help, it did not come. Just as they had abandoned the Thunderbird, this one had abandoned them.

Dhlo-Dhlo fell into the hands of the Gyosi. The Chezwi who survived the massacre fled, leaving Maguvurunde to the conquerors. Other peoples succeeded the Gyosi after their departure, and settled in Maguvurunde, building the kingdoms we know today.
Some descendants of the Chezwi also returned, but they only had old legends to bring from their past customs. Dhlo-Dhlo remained in ruins, and the Thunderbird flew no more. But the Chezwis claimed that the day it took flight again, then Maguvurunde would be united again.

When the monomatapa and the dakamatapa escaped from their slavery, they were separated while an attempt was made to recapture them. No one knew where the dakamatapa had gone. But the monomatapa, after escaping an ambush, went to Dhlo-Dhlo who had called him through his dreams.

There he had a vision that reshaped his life. And the Thunderbird returned. It flew with him when he crossed the Zimbazi River back to the Abamba Highlands.

In Maguvurunde the kingdoms of Inyanga and Mapungubwe continued their war against the Amanyani. This one was weakened. His ***ndaus*** were quarreling and the monomatapa could not control them. When the allied armies of the other two kingdoms attacked, the monomatapa was killed in battle and the Amanyani seemed very close to downfall.

I fought in this war. I was there when the Amanyani was on the verge of defeat. The battle was lost… It was then that the man who is now monomatapa led thousands of Ngwika and other

Abamba warriors, crossing Zimbabwe to fight alongside us. And the Lightning Bird was flying above him.

With the help of the Abamba, the Amanyani defeated the Mapungubwe and the Inyanga. The man whom the Bird of Lightning had chosen became monomatapa because the Bird had chosen him, respecting neither blood nor birth. In the past he had raised other men of humble stock, but never an Abamba.

It took time for the Amanyani to come to terms with this reality. An abamba monomatapa? It was unthinkable. But they couldn't reject the one the Thunderbird had chosen. And they couldn't forget what he had done.

When the woman who is now dakamatapa returned, the monomatapa completed his conquest of Maguvurunde. We are united again, as we were at the time of the Chezwi.

And now we learn that this stranger, Imaro, is his son! I have known the monomatapa since the day he saved my life on a battlefield. I have never seen him so upset as today.

A long silence followed Msipo's story. Then Pomphis spoke.

— With Imaro and his parents, we are in the presence of three extraordinary people. I think now our lives are going to take very different roads – depending on what they said to each other while we were talking here.

The others, even Msipo, could only nod.

Imaro was sitting on his low stool in the yard. He hadn't gotten up since Mkwayo had left him. His body swayed slowly back and forth, as if propelled by the breath of a shifting wind. His emotions were torn by the war between his past and his present.

***Son of no father... Son of no father... Son of no father...*** mocked the past, mercilessly.

***But you have two fathers,*** said the present.

***She didn't care; that's why she left me… she didn't care; that's why she left me… she didn't care; that's why she left me,*** cried the past with a child's voice.

***She didn't care,*** said the present.

***You're nothing… you're nothing… you're nothing…*** screamed the past desperately.

***It's a lie,*** said the present.

The present attacks the past. It defended itself with insidious tenacity, but the present tore it to shreds that died in puffs of acrid smoke, consumed by the blazing fire of Imaro's renewed soul.

The swaying ceased. Imaro stood up, as the rigidity that had encased his body in a cocoon of stone disappeared. His face lost its tortured features. His eyes were no longer empty. He went. In the darkness he groped his way along the winding passages of ***the imba.*** His hearing had become preternaturally sharp; the whispering voices of Katisa and Mkwayo pushed him forward.

He found himself out of ***the imba.*** The soldiers guarding the entrance looked at him but did nothing. He walked as if he had no control over his movements, but he didn't. He passed soldiers, ***ndaus*** and others, just as if they didn't exist. His eyes were focused at a distance beyond all horizons visible to others.

He soon reached the compound shared by Mkwayo and Katisa. She was guarded but the soldiers did not try to prevent her from entering. On the other side of the perimeter wall, his parents looked up at him. Mkwayo held his queen in his arms.

They got up, waited. The light from the fires illuminated a shimmering tableau of anticipation.

- Mother ? Imaro said, in a half-whisper. Dad ?

Katisa and Mkwayo kissed their son and then kissed each other. Their tears ran down the skin of Imaro's chest. But the Ilyassai did not cry.

He wouldn't cry. He wouldn't cry, even if the pressure of the held back tears threatened to make his eyes pop out of their sockets...

## 19.
# LE MAHIVA

In the distance, the ruined city of Dhlo-Dhlo seemed complete, alive. But as you approached closer to its walls, it seemed to sink a little deeper into the dilapidation with each step. Even in the golden blaze of Jua, the sun, Dhlo-Dhlo was a gigantic corpse of ferrous granite and clay that decayed as the rains washed away the rest of its existence.

Three ***mbizi*** carried their riders towards the ruins at a moderate pace. Mkwayo, Katisa, and Imaro were silent, each pondering the vanished Chezwi people who had long ago erected these walls. Where these had not collapsed, the arrangement of the stones remained intact. Treetops jutted out above walls three times the height of a man.

Mkwayo and Katisa wore leather armor on which was the emblem of the Amanyani. Imaro was dressed only in a skin loincloth, decorated with pearls. He rode a little behind his parents. During the two weeks he had spent with them, he had allowed them to get closer to him. He had told them about his exploits and experiences, relating them concisely, minimizing the facts.

Katisa smiled when Imaro told her that his own father, Mubaku, had recognized him as a grandson just before he left the Ilyassai. Mkwayo beamed with pride when Imaro told him about all the demons and other Mashataan creatures he had killed. His parents had shared his grief together when he recounted the killing of Tanisha and Kilewo.

But Imaro was not entirely comfortable with these new relationships with his parents, nor his new status in Maguvurunde – after Mkwayo proclaimed him benematapa, the prince who would inherit the monomatapa's empire upon death. of this one. Already rumors of displeasure were coming from the mothers of Mkwayo's other sons.

They didn't know that Imaro didn't want to be benematapa. His soul was still consumed by the desire to exact his revenge on Bohu. For this reason, Mkwayo and Katisa had agreed that Imaro's formal ascension to his new role would await the end of the war against the Naama.

From reports sent by Abamba allies from Mkwayo across the Zimbazi, it was evident that a single agent had unleashed the ***mfecane*** that was ravaging the Highlands. These disturbances prevented the monomatapa from marching an army on the Naama. Only Bohu could be at the origin of this violence. When Bohu was dead, the ***mfecane*** would cease. Killing him was Imaro's task.

And it was a mission that Imaro had to accomplish alone, without help. This had been decided after long hours of discussion with the monomatapa, Katisa, the ***ndaus*** and the foreigners.

Pomphis had contributed a great deal to this discussion. It would be pointless, he argued, to send an army of Maguvurunde soldiers into the Highlands in search of Bohu. It operated in a stealthy, subtle way, having nothing to do with sending masses of armed men onto a battlefield. It would only be a waste of time, energy and soldiers, which they would need in the final confrontation with the Naama.

No, Pomphis had insisted, Bohu had to be tracked by one man, as the kandisa had said. It was decided that Imaro would seek out and confront Bohu while the monomatapa would organize the forces that would fight the armies of Nongkwaze and Shingane. At the thought of leaving Rabir and Pomphis, Imaro's heart was filled with sadness. The two men had remained resolutely at his side in the worst adversities that had beset him since the day he had discovered the tortured bodies of his wife and son. Now the pygmy and the Zanjian would fight in the ranks of the monomatapa's army in the battles to come.

The separation had been painful, especially with Pomphis. Yet a secret part of Imaro felt an almost familiar relief at being alone again. When he crossed Zimbazi to go to the Abamba Highlands, the only deaths for which he would be responsible would be those of Bohu and his own.

Nalitali's journey to Dhlo-Dhlo had been a long one. The ancient capital was located far west of Mapungubwe, in the heart of the Kingdom of

the Amanyani. Not far from where parents and sons rode, a troop of ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** waited to escort them to the Zimbazi River. But first there was one thing Imaro had to do…

The ***mbizi*** slowly carried their riders behind the walls of Dhlo Dhlo. For the first time, Imaro found no aura of turmoil emanating from abandoned ruins, unlike what had happened in Stone Village, City of Madness, and Shihazz Palace.
No ghost from an evil past haunted the streets of Dhlo Dhlo.

Mkwayo guided Katisa and Imaro past the ruined city. It was not there that he had received the vision that made an emperor of a slave. This one had come to him in the forest behind Dhlo-Dhlo, a sacred forest in the eyes of the kings chezwi of old times. It was called "the site of carved trees." »

The forest was in fact little more than a large grove. Like the branches of the ***sharangwa*** of the frontier lands, its trees had no leaves or vines. But unlike them, they grew differently from all the trees in Nyumbani.

Each tree was fashioned into a sculpture of grotesque shape and enigmatic significance. At first glance, the carved trunks seemed deformed, horrible. Most took the form of bulbous masses of bodies, separated by thin, cylindrical stems that could pass for legs. Faces clung to these bodies, faces with twisted features and buck teeth.

There were other sculptures, even more disturbing. One represented a woman's body. Two grimacing faces clung to his chest instead of breasts. On his head grew a snake that wrapped its wooden rings around the body in an embrace that threatened to suffocate him. A forked tongue protruded from his open mouth.

There were two-faced heads above torsos that lacked arms or legs that reminded Imaro of the underground inhabitants of Bana-Gui. There were tree trunks transformed into masses of people stacked up to build a tall column of figures.
The bodies were twisted in impossible postures but the faces reflected a serene wisdom. There were animal shapes unlike anything that had ever trod the land of Nyumbani. There was

the abstract silhouettes of pure spirits, made of masses and voids suggesting eyes, nostrils and mouths…

Yet for all the warping of their forms, the trees of Mahiva were not as grotesque as they first seemed. The skill of the sculptors was not expressed by the aesthetics of their creations; the reality they represented defined their power, their fascination. For the trees of Mahiva were the tangible manifestations of the tortured emotions crawling beneath the surface of the mind of woman, of man.

The wood of Mahiva's trees was black. It had acquired a patina that seemed to make it immune to the ravages of wind and rain. The grain of the wood was clearly visible, like the mark of old carving tools.

The three ***mbizi paused*** in front of the forest. As their riders dismounted, they anxiously shook their heads and whipped their tails at imaginary flies.

Imaro looked questioningly at Mkwayo.

"No one knows who sculpted these trees, or why they haven't crumbled to dust for a long time," he said in response to his son's silent question. Mahiva is the name the Chezwi gave to the trees when they discovered them. They built Dhlo-Dhlo near here for spiritual reasons. The trees are silent, but they give visions.

- What have you seen here ? Imaro asked.

“I saw that my hatred for the Amanyani was useless. I saw that the peoples of Abamba and Maguvurunde had to unite. I saw what would happen if they didn't unite soon… We would all be crushed under the Naama's heels.

When I came out of the forest, my soul was purified. This is what you need, my son.

"His vision is reminiscent of the one you saw in the Mahali-ya-Kiu," said Imaro, turning to Katisa.

“Yeah,” she agreed. Perhaps there are places throughout Nyumbani where the gods are closer to us. But there are also some where it is the Mashataan who are…

“Like Stone Village, like Naama,” Imaro said.

- Yes.

Cloudy-eyed, Imaro looked at his parents. Then he turned and walked into the forest.

"He's still an Ilyassai," Katisa said. We don't like trees.

"You don't like walls either," smiled Mkwayo. And you don't like chains, and you don't like...

Katisa pressed a hand over his mouth to silence him. She smiled briefly, then frowned, worried.

"What will he find here, Mkwayo?" she asked.

“I cannot say. It's up to him to learn it.

The King and Queen of Maguvurunde sat down to await their son's return. The ***mbizi grazed*** the grass and Jua, the sun, poured down its heat from a cloudless sky.

Imaro walked slowly between the sculpted trees. The titanic trunks crushed it; he felt like a child who had ventured into a giant's workshop. The gigantic wooden faces looked down on him.

Empty eyes followed his progress through the trees. The forest was silent; there were no birds chirping, no monkeys in the trees, no animal movements. There were no bushes. Each tree was planted in a circle of virgin land separating it from the others.

The only sound rising, except for Imaro's footsteps, was the sigh of a warm breeze, between the cracks of the carvings. But the wind carried no message to the Ilyassai. It was just wind, nothing more.

The warrior finally arrived in front of a tree which seemed to him different from the others. It was carved in the shape of a man but also had features of a bird. The figure held a weapon with a blade; a weapon that could have easily decapitated an elephant if it had been made of steel and not wood.

The face was so high off the ground that Imaro couldn't make out its features or expression. But he knew the tree represented a warrior – like himself.

He sat down on the ground, leaning his back against the tree. He appreciated it the smooth surface against him. He felt comfortable there, as if he were at home.

"If a tree is going to show me anything, this will be it," he said to aloud. Will I see what my father saw?

Imaro closed his eyes and waited for his vision… which didn't come.

Behind the screen of his eyelids, Imaro could only make out darkness. There were no mental images, no voices, no advice. He only heard the sound of his own breathing and the wordless voice of the wind. He waited patiently. Yet he ends up understanding that by staying in the

forest, he wouldn't learn anything except how long he could sit in the same position.

But during his wait his soul calmed down. The corrosive effects of his past were healed; the bitterness he felt against himself was canceled and the shield he had raised against the world was lowered.

Yet there remained within him a blazing center of hatred which could not be quenched; it was smaller than before, took up less space in his soul, but was a part of him he couldn't escape. Without that, he couldn't be who he was, or who he needed to be to play his part in the coming confrontation against the Naama and against Bohu. He accepted this part of himself. But he wouldn't let her rule him anymore.

He opened his eyes. The sun made him blink.

“Visions are good for kings, not warriors,” he finally decided.

He stood up and bade farewell to the wooden warrior who had reminded him of himself.

Jua was beginning his descent west when Imaro emerged from the Mahiva Forest. There was no change in his attitude, no evidence that he had experienced any primordial revelations.

Katisa and Mkwayo interrupted their conversation when they heard Imaro's footsteps. They were preparing plans and stratagems for the coming war. Katisa was about to ask Imaro what he saw in the forest when Mkwayo touched her arm and motioned for her to be quiet. Both waited for their son's words.

"I'm ready," he said simply.

Mkwayo was about to speak, but the sound of the ***mbizi*** 's hooves prevented him. His hand went to the hilt of his sword. He had expressly specified that he should not be disturbed except in an absolute emergency. The same thought imposed itself on Mkwayo, Katisa and Imaro. What news did he bring?

The soldier halted and dismounted hastily. His face was dripping with sweat and his mount was foaming. He saluted his monarch and released his message.

“A ***mhondoro*** priestess has arrived at ***the imba,*** O monomatapa.

Mkwayo and Katisa exchanged a look. The priestesses usually stayed in their temples, far away from the cities, where they did not

returned only when the situation was serious.

"And she's… accompanied," added the guard.

- By who ? asked the monomatapa.

The soldier seemed to hesitate before answering.

“You better see it with your eyes, O monomatapa.

Without another word, Imaro and his parents got on their ***mbizi*** and followed the soldier. Behind them, the Mahiva rustled slightly, before falling back into silence.

## 20.

### FAREWELL

***Ntoa*** 's imba was much larger and grander than Nalitali's, as it housed the throne of an emperor and not just a king. Soldiers in ceremonial dress, topped with multicolored feathers, were lined up on either side of the walkway leading to ***the imba.*** They lowered their spears in respect as the monomatapa, dakamatapa, and benematapa passed them. A squad broke away from the ranks to accompany the three new arrivals inside the building.

A large group of ***ndaus*** were already amassed inside the open courtyard. All had their eyes on Imaro. The news of his coming to Ntoa had preceded it and he was always an object of curiosity and speculation. He represented the next generation of Maguvurunde leaders, and not all ***ndaus*** were happy with this.

Pomphis, Rabir and Majnun were also present. They had accompanied the monomatapa and his family from Nalitali to participate in the development of the strategy for the difficult days ahead.

In the center of the courtyard stood the ***mhondoro priestess.*** Her naked body, coated in yellow pigment, contrasted sharply with the splendor that surrounded her. His expression was impassive, his eyes cloudy.

"Where is the 'other'?" Mkwayo asked the soldier who had delivered the enigmatic message. “You will see, O monomatapa,” replied the soldier.

Frowning at the ambiguity of that answer, Mkwayo stepped onto the pedestal on which stood the ebony throne inlaid with gold and ivory that was the seat of his empire. A purple silk cape was passed around her shoulders, as well as those of Imaro and Katisa, sunny yellow for her, midnight blue for him. All three sat on their respective thrones. Imaro was obviously uncomfortable.

***He would rather be with us,*** thought Pomphis.

“Hail to you, monomatapa Mkwayo,” the ***mhondoro*** priestess said in a sonorous voice.

Imaro twisted his head in surprise. He had never seen the priestess before, but he knew that voice...

The figure of the priestess blurred, became blurred. When she resumed her distinct form, another woman stood in her place, a woman wrapped in a white robe, with ebony skin and golden eyes.

"Ha-Nala," Pomphis whispered.

The kandisa turned her head towards the Bambuti and smiled as she recognized him.

- Yes it's me.

Strangled murmurs of surprise rose from the crowd gathered in the court. Guards advanced, spears brandished, ready to strike.

- Wait ! snapped the monomatapa.

The guards lowered their weapons.

The kandisa returned her attention to the dais. Imaro stood up, but he did not approach her.

"You found your mother and your father," she said. You found the answers you were looking for.

Imaro nodded.

The kandisa looked at Mkwayo and Katisa approvingly before turning to Majnun. The exiled king was wide-eyed, like everyone else in the court.

"Do you know who I am, Majnun of Kitwana?" she asked.

"You can only be the kandisa of the Cush," he replied.

“You seek help for your fallen kingdom. This helps you will be granted.

"I'll discuss it with the monomatapa," Majnun said. He calculates how many men he can allocate me to hunt the Naama while marching south himself to strike our enemies in the heart.

"He won't need to give you many men," said the kandisa.

- Why that ? asked Majnun and the monomatapa, almost with one voice.

“The Northern and Eastern Kingdoms are now as one. A war fleet such as the Nyumbani has never known since the invasion of the Mizungu is on its way to Mlongo. You must now return to Kitwana. You will only need monomatapa soldiers other than those necessary to ensure your crossing of the bure. Kitwana will be a

major battleground during the war against Naama, she said.
Your people have already suffered a lot. But he will suffer even more before the war ends. It's necessary.

Majnun nodded, slowly and sadly. The kandisa turned to the Bambuti.

"You have done well, Pomphis," she said. But you have to do more.
Majnun will need your guidance and wisdom to help him regain his throne and crown.

"He will have them, Ha-Nala," said Pomphis.

The kandisa smiled, then looked at Rabir.

“You too, captain, will go to Kitwana. And again you will sail on the Bahari.

Rabir replied with a sincere smile. He had been dying for it since the day he had set foot in Kitwana. The silhouette of the kandisa became blurred. She turned one last time to the royal canopy.

'It is wise for Imaro to go alone to face Bohu. But whether he succeeds or fails, you must lead the combined forces of the Maguvurunde kingdoms and the Abamba tribes to Naama. Between your forces and mine, we have a chance of defeating the Erriten and ending the threat of the Mashataan.

"I will," Mkwayo said resolutely. This is why we, I mean Imaro, Katisa and I were chosen to be who we are.

The kandisa's body became translucent, and the figure of the ***mhondoro*** priestess reappeared at the same time, the two women apparently occupying the same space simultaneously, as impossible as that seemed.

"I have to go now," said the kandisa.

- Hold on ! cried Katisa.

The kandisa looked at her. It was difficult for her to maintain her projection, but she managed to hear the dakamatapa's question.

"Do you have a son?" Katisa asked.

"Yes," she replied, a mask of sadness crossing her features.
translucent. A girl. I had to… abandon him.

The two women exchanged a look of understanding that went far beyond the words they had just exchanged.

“Goodbye,” the kandisa said, just as she was disappearing.

The ***mhondoro*** priestess slumped to the ground. She was having trouble breathing and sounded sound asleep. People bent down to help him.

The monomatapa's voice sounded like a clap of thunder.

“We have a lot to do. At work !

Pomphis sat with Imaro in the apartments reserved for the benematapa. The Bambuti was surprised by the splendor of the place, very different from those in which Tanisha, Imaro and he had been able to sleep during their journey.

"So you are the son of a king," said Pomphis. I always knew you were more than you thought you were, Imaro. But I never could have guessed what you learned, especially about the Cloud Striders.

"What did the kandisa know, exactly?"

'She had only a vague, very general idea of the events.

Imaro took a sip of palm wine.

"I met my brothers and sisters, the children of my father's other wives," Imaro said thoughtfully. I didn't know what to think, and neither did they.

Another sip.

“I know the eldest doesn't like me. He would have been benematapa if I hadn't been there.

“Soon you won't have to worry about all that,” said Pomphis. You'll be too busy trying to stay alive. And I won't be here to help you out anymore.

Both men chuckled. They had saved each other's lives several times since their meeting, but Pomphis was the one who had been the most prone to getting into various traps.

He had, however, also been Imaro's guide as he discovered the wonders and perils of civilized life, which could sometimes be more dangerous than the savage world.

Imaro's expression darkened. He looked at his cup, but did not drink.

"If it could bring Tanisha and Kilewo back, I'd give everything I have now," he said, embracing his chambers, the city, and the entire empire he now inherited.

Pomphis nodded slowly.

“But I can't bring them back. Nothing can bring them back. All what I can do is avenge them.

“You will do more than avenge them, my friend. You will help prevent the destruction of the Nyumbani.

“I wish you could come with me,” Imaro said, “but the kandisa is right. Majnun will need you more than me. What I have to do, I have to do alone.

“You will get there, Imaro. I know it. Have you ever seen me wrong?

Imaro burst out laughing, and Pomphis accompanied him. They spent the next few hours drinking, remembering, laughing and mourning the dead. When Pomphis finally left for his quarters, they shook hands for a long moment, in a gesture that was more than a goodbye. Both knew there was a good chance they would never see each other again.

Two armies of fighters lined the banks of the Zimbazi River. On the north side was a company of ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi.*** Jua's beams shone on the metal of their armor and weapons. The ***mbizi snorted*** and trampled the muddy ground as their riders relaxed in their saddles. Behind them lay the flat, wooded border of Maguvurunde.

On the south side awaited an ***impi*** of Ngwika warriors. They were tall, heavy-featured men who disdained the protection of armor.
Instead, they relied on their long, oval leather shields, which provided a formidable barrier between their bare skin and the weapons of their enemies.

Their other weapons were spears, battle axes, and hard, bulging-tipped sticks called ***kirris.*** Like the warriors of other Abamba tribes, the Ngwika went on foot. In the land of hills rising behind them, riding an animal was a hindrance in combat.

A few rains before, a meeting between soldiers of Maguvurunde and warriors of the Highlands would have reddened with blood the waters of Zimbazi.
Now an ***nkosi*** ngwika ruled Maguvurunde and the tribe was loyal to the monomatapa.

Although the Zimbazi was wide it remained shallow enough to be traversed during the dry season. During the rainy season, it was a raging torrent that created an impassable barrier between north and south. That day, while the Ngwika and the Amanyani faced each other, the

river could only come up to the mid-thighs of a good-sized man.

Mkwayo and Imaro rode at the head of the ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi.*** Earlier, the warrior had said goodbye to Katisa. Holding her in his arms, he had felt strangely overwhelmed, as if touched by the ghost of the memory of the rare times she had held him like this when he was a child.

When they looked at each other, Imaro's eyes were filled with forgiveness; those of Katisa of penance. The messages in their eyes had a far greater meaning than the last words they had exchanged.

Now father and son were crossing the Zimbazi, leaving the soldiers on the shore. Their presence was more ceremonial than necessary; the monomatapa had nothing to fear from the Ngwika.

When Imaro and Mkwayo reached the other side of the river, they dismounted and stood before the silent warriors. Most of them were as tall as Imaro. Some were even bigger. They wore no ornaments except rows of blood-red beads around their necks. Their hair was cut very short. Many wore a mustache and a goatee.

The practiced ease with which they held their weapons, the poised, watchful attitude that could see them into action in the blink of an eye, the quiet confidence in their eyes – more than one aspect of the people of his father reminded Imaro of the Ilyassai.

But they had always looked at him with contempt because he was different. The Ngwika's faces – faces resembling his own – lit up with smiles as they looked at him. He heard them mutter the word ***izizalwana.*** Mkwayo had already told him that this was the word ngwika meaning "of the family of".

A warrior stepped forward to greet Imaro and Mkwayo. His resemblance to the latter was evident, although he was a head shorter than the monomatapa and his son. Imaro already knew who this man was.

"It's my brother, Nkwana, who is now the ***nkosi*** of my people," Mkwayo had said earlier. Trust him. He will teach you about life in the Highlands, the things you will need when you hunt down your enemy. But I don't think Bohu will run away from you again...

Imaro nodded.

“In the hills you will meet many of your family, my son. And you will be welcome among them. They are your people and less quick to condemn than your mother's. These taught you to be an Ilyassai. You will now learn to be an Ngwika. I think you will find this experience more enjoyable than the first one.

Imaro nodded. If all the Ngwika were like his father, he would like to live among them – at least until the time came to head for his final confrontation with Bohu.

Nkwana wrapped her arms around Mkwayo in an embrace that would have broken another man's ribs. Mkwayo responded by lifting his brother off the ground.
Both men were laughing.

Then Nkwana stepped back and looked at Imaro. The abundance of white hair on his head told Imaro that his uncle was a few rains older than his father. Humor and compassion could easily be read in Nkwana's eyes. Her smile stretched her skin over her broad cheekbones.

"Yes, he is your son, Mkwayo," he said, speaking the language of Maguvurunde so that Imaro could at least partially understand him. He's probably the only man capable of knocking you down on your ass. Udali knows that I never succeeded!

"Be careful, brother," said Mkwayo. He might just knock you over yours.

- Oh, I'll be careful, Mkwayo, you can believe me ... as much as with you.

He burst into a thunderous laugh, soon imitated by his brother.

"Come, ***izizalwana,*** " Nkwana said, putting his hand on Imaro's shoulder.
Our main village is several days' walk from here. A party awaits you. Then you'll have a lot to learn before you start hunting whoever caused the ***mfecane.***

"It will be nice to learn from you, ***izizalwana,*** " Imaro said, mimicking the gesture of Nkwana.

Turning to Mkwayo, he hesitated for a moment, then kissed him.

"I'm happy not to have defeated you in Mapungubwe, him
he whispered in her ear.

Mkwayo nodded, not saying anything.

A shout from one of the warriors suddenly raised all eyes to the azure sky. A bird flew there, at an incredible speed, its long plumage

extending behind him like a yellow and white flame. The bird described a circle and let out a cry that cut through the air like a spear.

Then it disappeared with a vivacity that made the wind seem slow. The sound of its passing through the sky struck the ears of observers like a clap of thunder.

— ***Impundulu,*** murmur Nkwana, using the ngwika name of the Bird of Lightning. It's a good omen.

“As always,” Mkwayo said calmly.

' Let's go then, ***izizalwana.***

Imaro took his place among the Ngwika warriors. Waving his arm in a final farewell to his father, he began to advance into the land of his new people.

He didn't tell anyone that the kandisa bracelets were starting to tingle him again, that they had done so since he had crossed Zimbazi. Bohu's trail was alive again.

The hunt was beginning.

# EPILOGUE

***In Mlongo…***

A starless, moonless night covered the city like a shroud.

In Majnun's palace, emerald light blazed and then faded in rhythmic pulsations, drawing the contours of the slender edifice. Dark hunched figures paced back and forth through the entrance to the palace. None were human. Apart from the Naama and Abamba invaders, only a few humans remained in Mlongo. The city was now an extension of the Naama and bore the cruel mark of the Erriten.

Whole flotillas had come from the south, carrying even more Erriten and other Naama. There were now nine Erriten in Mlongo…
More than half of the True Adepts had left their southern citadel. The new boats had also brought other ***unthlatu, izingogo*** and ***irimu.***
And another cargo had also landed – mysterious, completely covered in cloth as it was carried into the palace.

The Erriten were turning Mlongo into an impregnable fortress. Because they knew that the kandisa was coming. They would be ready to receive it…

Inside the palace, the faces of the Erriten wore an expression of pain mingled with bliss, as they drank in the power contained in the orbs suspended above their heads. The illumination of the ***mchawi*** filled the palace with a blinding green glow that cut through the night like shards of broken glass.

***Each of you is more powerful than her,*** assured them the voice of the Mashataan. ***Whatever she does, you will be victorious...***

And although they knew what had happened in Maguvurunde, the Erriten were certain that their masters were telling the truth.

***Sur le Bahari Participants…***

An armada of vessels more numerous than had ever been seen before on any coast of Nyumbani was sailing with good wind towards Mlongo. The ships of the nations of the North had been joined by the warships of Azania. The sha'a himself, old as he was, was aboard his flagship. It seemed like twenty rains had fallen from his shoulders since he had met the kandisa at Mavindi.

His ships reinforced an alliance already large enough to destroy the fleet of any east coast kingdom. They were sailing to Kitwana, but the armada's ultimate destination was Naama. And to take the Naama, even the hundreds of ships commanded by the kandisa could prove insufficient...

***In the Abamba Highlands…***

Bohu rode a mountain of corpses, while the ***impis*** of Shingane brought him offerings. The flames of gigantic bonfires illuminated his silhouette, but did not reveal his features. His face was hidden for eternity by a spell of darkness.

The fires were fueled by thatched-roof dwellings. Shingane's forces had taken yet another village and exterminated its inhabitants. The plaintive cries of the dying drifted skyward, brushing Bohu's insensitive ears. His cloaked eyes were fixed north, on the horizon, beyond the rounded hills wedged between the Maguvurunde and the Naama.

***Shingane serves me well,*** Bohu thought as smoke rose around him. ***As well as I serve my own masters. No… Better.***
***Better, because he doesn't question me like I question the Erriten. He is happy with what I give him. What they give me is not enough for me...***

Bohu half-closed his eyes and stretched out the fingers of one hand in front of his face. He spoke a word; green flashes crackled between his fingers.

“Come to me, Imaro,” he hummed. Come to me…

The weapons were drawn.

The carnage could begin.

DAW
BOOKS

# IMARO

The magic of the Demon Gods was mobilized for vengeance, was crying out: "We will strike in lands of the Abamba. We will strike along the East Coast. We will strike in Punt and Axum. And we will strike in the heart of Cush itself!

"Yes, in Cush! And in Cush we will destroy Imaro and avenge his slaying of Chitendu and Chikanda! With the Ilyassai gone, the rest of our tasks will be easy to accomplish...."

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